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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A Complete Novel

THE SILVER STAR

By Harry Sinclair Drago

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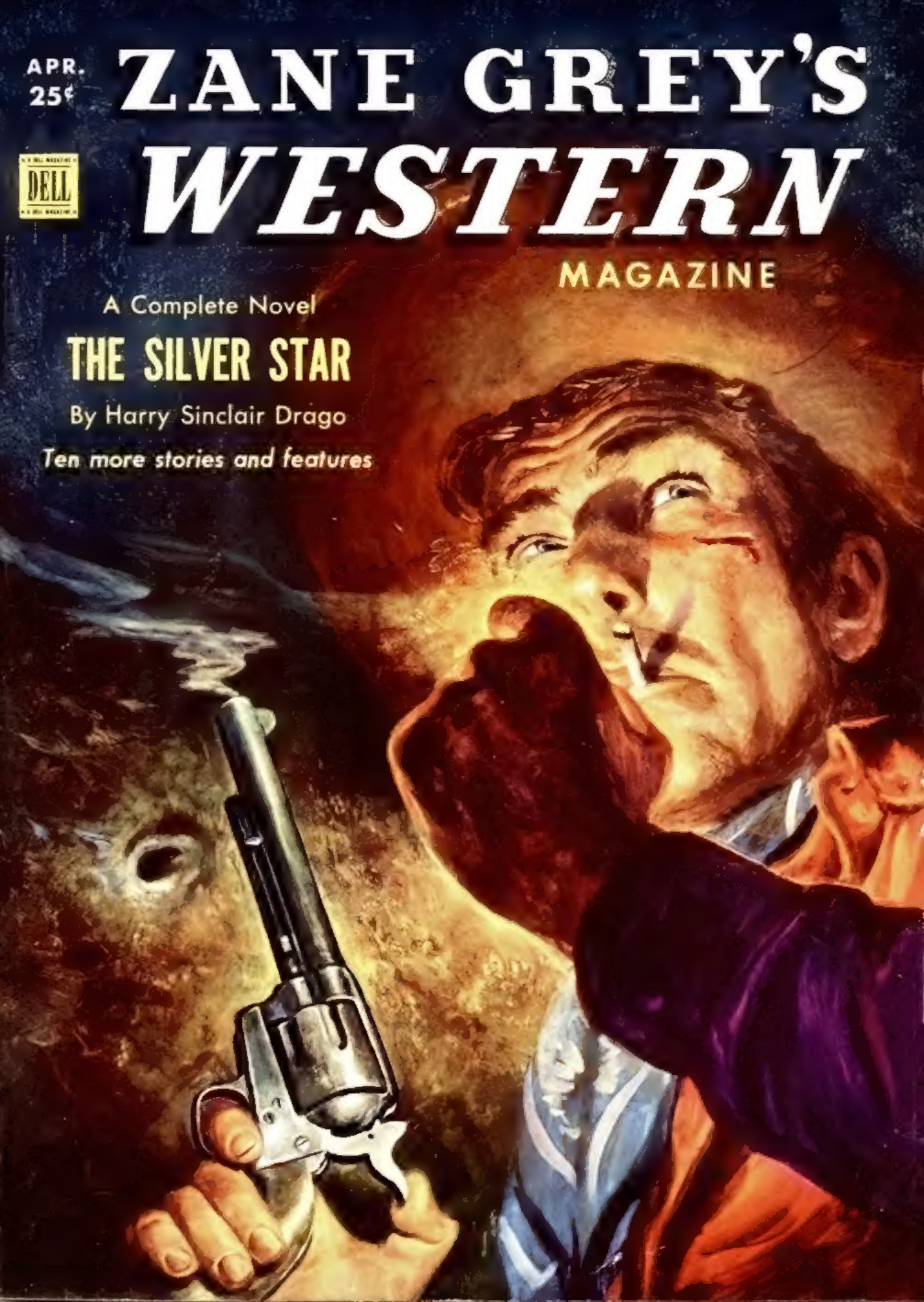

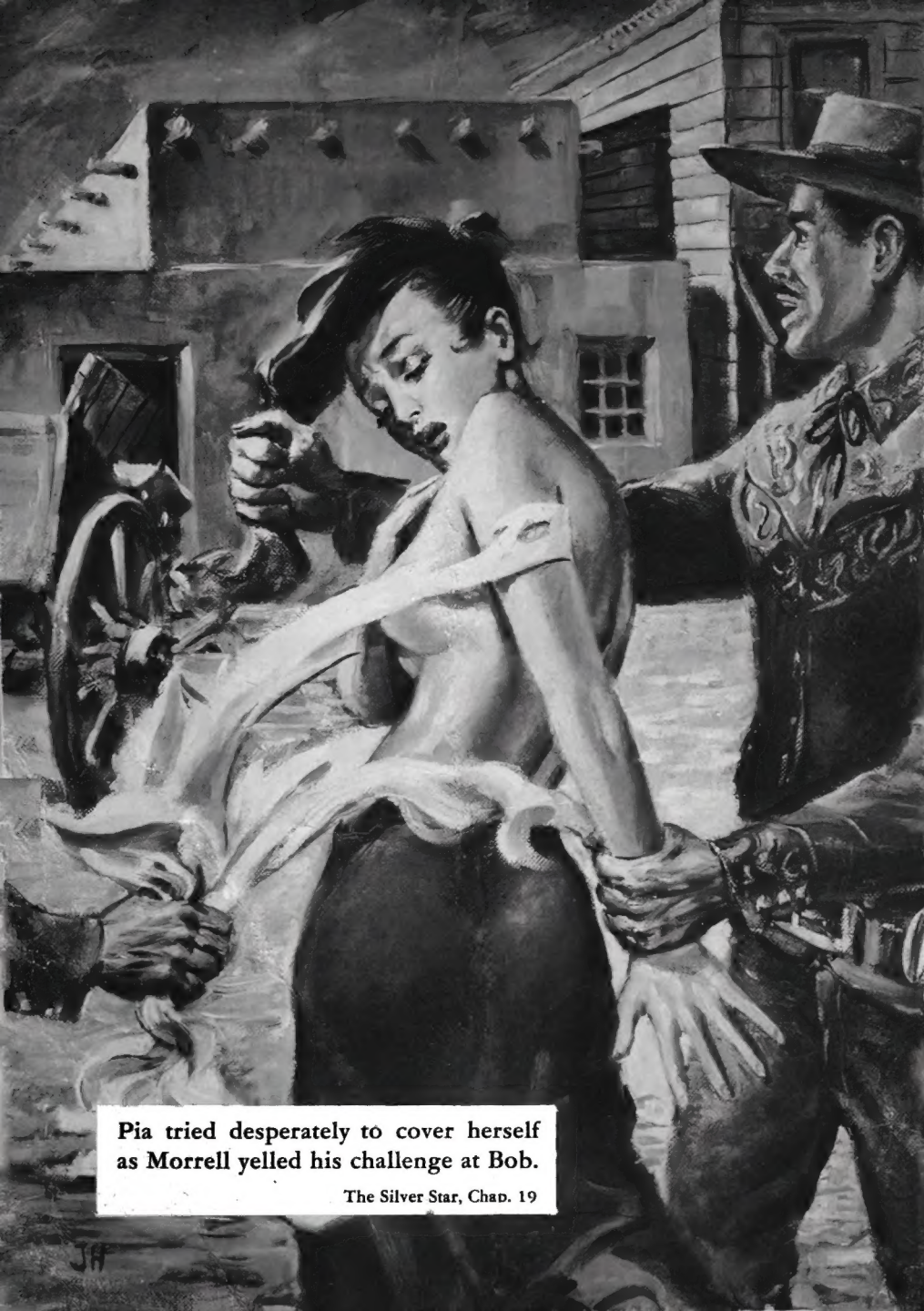

Pia tried desperately to cover herself as Morrell yelled his challenge at Bob.

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THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *THE SILVER STAR*

THE BRUTAL MURDER *of his brother Tom during a stage holdup leads Box Maxwell, widely known and respected as a competent, law-abiding range foreman, to take the trail of a wanton killer, vengeance-bent. Sided by his normally easy-going, fun-loving brother Luis, Bob gets a riding job with the big 7-11 outfit, near the outlaw-dominated town of Wild Horse, among whose denizens, Bob has reason to suspect, lurks the killer of Tom Maxwell. In Wild Horse Bob meets such questionable characters as rustler-boss gross "Hog" Smith; would-be badman Doc Morrell; behind-the-scenes manipulator Cap Null; venal Town Marshal Shep Smiley; and "Judge" Ben East, victim of bad whisky and a worse conscience. There, also, are saddlemaker Antonio Sandoval and his lovely, gentle-spirited daughter, Pia; the devoted priest, Padre Donates; and Rawhide Gulch's three-hundred-pound madam, Queenie Anderson, who proves a surprising ally in a crisis. In a running fight with cattle thieves, Bob wins the confidence of the region's ranchers, but the tragic fate of Luis gives him added, bitter incentive to smash the Wild Horse gang. In a desperate effort to bring the law to Wild Horse, Sheriff Buck Childress deputizes Bob, but even then there are trouble and gunsmoke aplenty before Wild Horse is tamed for good and the baffling mystery of Tom Maxwell's death is solved.*

"The Silver Star," by that long-time favorite among Western writers, Harry Sinclair Drago, is a hard-hitting, action-filled novel of a peaceful man turned by circumstance into a grim, inexorable man hunter.

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THE SILVER STAR

By Harry Sinclair Drago

Chapter One

The Drawing in the Dust

ALTHOUGH this uncertain and little-used trail through the Penasco Hills, with its many turnings and numerous washouts, did not make for speed, it represented a clear saving of eight miles on the long ride between the Double R and Las Animas. Bob Maxwell found himself cutting through the Penascos this afternoon only because he had been late in leaving the ranch for his appointment in town with his brothers.

When the trail brought him out of the hills and he had the Guzman Plains ahead of him, he rode swiftly and effortlessly, a tall man, even in the saddle, lean and wide of shoulder.

The New Mexican sun had long ago tanned his olive-tinted skin a deep, saddle-leather brown. It did not detract from his finely sculptured features (a gift from his Spanish-American mother) or the dignity and reserve in his intelligent dark eyes.

It was the custom in New Mexico, at the time, for young men of his age—he was in his early thirties—to adorn their faces with a mustache, carefully tended and trimmed to a rakish thinness, which was presumed to be attractive to the feminine eye. It was characteristic of Bob Maxwell (he had been christened Roberto Maria y Valdez Maxwell) that such dandyisms were not for him. It was one of many reasons why, in speaking of him, Pat Crozier, the owner of Double R, and other men of importance in Mescalero County often concluded by saying, "There's no nonsense about Bob Maxwell."

These Guzman Plains swelled up to modest bluffs overlooking the Rio Grande. Having reached the ribbon of dust that was the road into Las Animas from the east, an hour's riding brought Maxwell to the bluffs. Ahead of him a horseman, jogging leisurely toward town, pulled up to await his coming, made curious by the haste at which he rode. This was Buck Childress, the

sheriff of Mescalero County.

"What's the rush?" Buck inquired, as Maxwell reined up at his side. "I noticed you back there, a mile or so. You're pushin' that bronc purty hard, Bob."

"This red horse likes to run, Buck," the latter replied, with a smile that revealed his even white teeth. "I planned for a week to be in town early this afternoon. Something came up at the last minute and I couldn't get away till noon. I'm going to meet the boys in Las Animas. Tom's coming in from Alamosa on the afternoon stage. Luis said he'd be up from Blue Mesa this morning. Tom's birthday."

The sheriff shook his head. "That's a heap of ridin' just for a birthday get-together. I know you always do it. I admire the way you Maxwells stick together." He glanced at his watch.

"How late is it, Buck?"

"Gittin' on to four o'clock. You better breeze along if you're goin' to beat the stage in. I'll just take my time. See you in town."

Being the county seat had brought Las Animas a measure of importance; but it was cattle and the traffic with the mines in the La Paz Mountains, forty miles to the west, on which its prosperity depended. And now more so than ever, for the Santa Fe had built down from Albuquerque within the year, making it the shipping point for a vast empire of grass, gold and silver.

It had been predicted that great changes would come with the arrival of the railroad. Some had; others were sure to follow. But as Bob Maxwell forded the river and rode up the shaded main street, Las Animas looked the same as it had for years. Its old adobes, with their deep embrasured windows, were a familiar sight, their darkened interiors appearing cool and inviting to a man who had been in the sun all day. As usual, hides were drying on the rack in front of Sol Mossman's store. Not even the bad crack above the door of Steve Bannon's Stockmen's Saloon had been repaired. The ponies and assorted rigs and ranch wagons standing at the hitch racks were the same that had stood there for as long as he could remember.

The Getty and Wadell stage from the west had not yet arrived. In front of the express company's office a handful of people waited for it to roll in.

Luis Maxwell hurried across the plank sidewalk, spur chains jangling, as Bob turned into the hitch rack. He was the youngest of the brothers. All three were of a size and bore a marked resemblance, but there was a reckless light in Luis's eyes and a devil-may-care tilt to his mouth that time and experience had yet to temper.

"The stage is late and so are you," he said.

Bob explained his tardiness. When he swung down from the saddle, they eyed each other carefully, and that long glance was eloquent with unvoiced feeling. There was no shaking of hands or slapping on the back, though this was the first time they had been together in months.

"Do you suppose Tom will make it?" asked Luis.

"Why not?"

"I hear there's been fresh trouble west of Alamosa. Another stage held up a couple days ago."

Tom Maxwell was the Getty and Wadell agent at Alamosa.

Bob nodded. "So I heard. They didn't get away with much. They'd have had

richer pickings if they had raided the station. But they don't try that any more, not since Tom's been out there."

"I know," Luis agreed. "But they may try it some day. Tom's got that bad leg; he can't get around as fast as he used to."

"Don't worry," Bob said lightly. "Tom can handle himself– Here comes the stage now."

They were not surprised to see their brother riding the box with the driver. The oldest of the three by five years, he had left New Mexico to ride shotgun out of Tombstone for Wells, Fargo until his right knee was shattered by a slug from a bandit gun while protecting company treasure. His proudest possession was the gold watch that had been presented to him by Wells, Fargo, bearing its insignia and inscribed, *To Tomás Maxwell–in recognition of exceptional bravery and loyalty.* Forced into retirement, he had come home and after several years had regained the use of his leg sufficiently to go to work for Getty and Wadell.

"I reckon you figured we'd run into trouble," he called down to Bob and Luis, grinning in his pleasure at seeing them.

"I was beginning to wonder," Luis tossed back lightly. "I hear you're wading around in trouble out there."

"Nothing of the sort," Tom protested, giving Hank Peters, the driver, a wink. "Just enough excitement to relieve the monotony. Little cloudburst east of Alamosa during the night. Road washed out. Hank came right along, once we got through it."

After the passengers had alighted, he handed his sawed-off shotgun to Bob and got down. The latter did not offer to help him, knowing his brother was sensitive about his infirmity.

Doing his best to conceal his limp, Tom walked up to the office window and turned his gun over to the local agent for safekeeping.

"You fellas are a sight for sore eyes," he declared, on rejoining his brothers. "When I got your letter, Bob, I made up my mind I wouldn't let anything stop me from coming in. Road agents have been stopping our stages on an average of one every ten days."

"Just trouble enough to break the monotony, eh?" Luis said, with a knowing grin. "You weren't fooling anybody."

"I didn't think I was. The company plays it down, but we're having tough going. There's no law west of Alamosa. The Sheba Mining Company is hiring its own armed guards to escort our stages as far east as my station, whenever they have a shipment of bullion going through."

"Can't Childress do anything about it?" young Luis asked.

"Singlehanded?" Tom shook his head. "Not a chance, Luis. He'd need an army of paid deputies to clean out that bunch of thieves and outlaws who have the run of Wild Horse. But let's get off of that. I'll have to be heading back in the morning. We'll have the evening together. Suppose we make the most of it."

There were several hotels in town that offered better than average fare, according to New Mexican standards, but it was to Elena Baca's *Casa Verdugo*, nestling among its cottonwoods and overlooking the river, that the initiated repaired on special occasions. Whether true or not, old Elena contended that it was under her roof that the succulent *enchilada con frijoles* was originated, back in the days of her

grandmother.

"I arranged everything when I was in town the other day," Bob assured him. "I told Elena to do it up right and have plenty of wine. She'll put us up for the night. We'll have some music and singing. Elena's got two of her nieces from San Marcial visiting her. They're as pretty as you please. She asked me if we'd like to have them come in after dinner. She said little Lupe Morales, next door, would make three."

"I hope you said yes," Tom exclaimed enthusiastically. "That Lupe is as light on her feet as a feather. I could dance with her when I was hobbling around on one leg."

Bob said gaily, "They'll be there."

Though their religion rested lightly on them, they were devout enough, in their way. It was their custom, whenever they got together, to go to the mission, light candles for the repose of their mother's soul and visit her grave in the mission yard. Luis mentioned it now.

"We'll have time enough afterward to drop into Steve's place for a drink or two before we go down to Elena's."

Falling into step, they started down the street. They were proud men, owners of a proud name, these Scotch-Spanish-American Maxwells. In their veins flowed the blood of the fabulous Lucien; he who had tossed his millions away with a lavish hand and whose achievements and prodigalities were ever to form a bright page in the pioneer history of New Mexico. They bore themselves accordingly and it was a tribute to the esteem in which they were held that the ugly word "greaser" was never directed at them.

Men of high and low degree and of all shades of color greeted the brothers as they passed and thought nothing, at the time, of seeing them; the Maxwells were a familiar sight in Las Animas. Later, men were to remember how they had seen them this afternoon, striding up the street, shoulder to shoulder, heads held high and all primed for pleasure; for it was the last time the brothers were to be seen together. Two days later Tom Maxwell was to lie dead in the dust outside the express station at Alamosa, with the safe rifled and no one to say who had slain him.

Though Buck Childress had sent for them at once, the body had been removed before Bob and Luis got to Alamosa. He was there, waiting.

"Who got him, Buck?" Bob Maxwell's face was hard and flat as he put the question.

"I don't know," Childress said frankly. "They caught him here alone and got him outside by some trick. I don't even know exactly when it happened. Everythin' was all right when the eastbound stage went through, a few minutes after twelve."

"How come he got caught here alone?" young Luis demanded. The devil-may-care light was gone from his eyes. "Tom told us the other evening that he had a couple Mexican stock tenders here that he could depend on. What were they doing?"

"Tom sent them up the creek a couple miles to git a load of hay. After the stage pulled out, the three of them had a bite to eat, then the boys left with the wagon. They were gone about two hours. They found him lyin' outside when they got back. The two boys are here. They didn't have anythin' to do with this job. You can question them if you like."

Bob shook his head. "Tom must have known they were all right. Since you say so too, that's good enough for us. It couldn't have been a one-man job."

"No, there was three of 'em. I base that on the tracks I found in the dust. They was fresh when I got here. If Tom had been suspicious of anythin', he wouldn't have gone outside; but he walks out and don't even bother to take his shotgun. There it is—standing up in the corner. I know it musta been somethin' unusual to throw him off guard that way."

"You've got some idea of what happened," Bob declared.

"I have! It's just a guess. I've sat here for hours tryin' one idea out after another. The best I've come up with is this. I figger these three gents came in from the west and moved down the crick till they was maybe a quarter mile away, and hid out in the bottoms. They meant to raid the stage, sure enough, but I reckon they changed their plans after the stage rolled out and they saw the Mexicans drive off. They knew they had Tom alone and there'd be nothin' to it if they could git him outside without givin' him any cause to suspect what the game was."

"If they got away with anything like that, it means they were strangers to Tom," Bob declared grimly.

"I reckon they was," Childress agreed. "It's the only way you can explain it. Suppose those rats dropped back west a mile or so and one of 'em draped himself over his saddle, belly down, as though he was shot up bad, and they hit the road then, bold as you please, and came on toward the station—leadin' the wounded man's hoss and payin' their poor pardner a lot of attention. That would have pulled the wool over Tom's eyes. He'd seen dyin' men carted into town on hossback before; he'd have wanted to know who this one was, and what had happened. Tom wasn't fifteen feet from the door when he was cut down. He had three slugs in his chest. Any one of 'em would have killed him."

Plausible as this was, it was only conjecture. There was no doubt, however, of what had taken place once Tom Maxwell lay dying. The condition of the station safe was evidence enough. The bandits had moved it out from the wall, knocked off the door handles with a convenient sledge, and filled the holes with giant powder. The blast had torn one door out of its hinges and left the other twisted and sagging.

Sam Getty had gone over the station accounts and placed the loss at over four thousand dollars. At the moment, the difficulties of the express company were of small concern to the Maxwells; they had rushed to Alamosa with only one purpose in mind.

"That may have been the way of it," Bob said soberly after a long, thoughtful silence. "It doesn't matter; they got him—shot him down in cold blood, knowing he was unarmed—that's what is important. When Ad Finney brought your message to the ranch, he said you had something here you wanted to show Luis and me. What is it, Buck?"

"It's evidence of a sort. It couldn't be moved, and I realized it wouldn't keep long. That's why I wanted you here at once. The two of you come outside with me."

He led them to a spot a few feet to the right of the door, where loose brush was piled. He removed the brush a piece at a time. Beneath the pile a small square of canvas, part of an old tarp, covered the ground. Childress

lifted it aside with great care.

"This is where you found him?" Luis questioned.

"It's where he was layin' when I got here. The Mexicans found him, of course. One of 'em was smart enough to notice some lines in the dust. What those markin's meant Miguel didn't know, but he figgered they better not touch anythin'. Bein' careful where we stepped, we lifted Tom and carried him into the station."

In the dust Bob and Luis saw what appeared to be a crude drawing. They had difficulty deciphering it.

"You're lookin' at it from the wrong angle," Childress grumbled. "Step around in back of me to the other side."

"I get it!" Luis muttered tensely. "It's a picture of a man—just the middle section around the waist—with a holster on the left hip." He flicked a glance at his brother. "See that arrow pointing to the holster?"

"It's plain enough," was Bob's tight-lipped response. He turned to Childress. "Buck—are you sure that Tom traced out that drawing with his finger, as he lay dying?"

"I'm dead sure! I wouldn't have got you out here if I wasn't. Tom made those lines with a sliver of wood. It was still clutched in his fingers when we carried him inside. He wanted to leave a message for us and this was the only way he had. He certainly didn't figger we'd have so much trouble readin' it."

"I don't know why you say that!" Luis jerked out fiercely. "He was trying to tell us that the skunk who got him is a left-hander. That's something to know. The left-handed draw is something you see damn seldom."

"Yeh, but the across-the-body draw is common enough," Bob reminded him. "That puts a man's gun on the left hip. I understand what Buck means; the message can be read two ways."

"That's exactly what I meant," Childress drawled. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he studied the crude drawing. "It was either a left-hander or some gent makin' the old across-the-belly Texas draw. Mebbe we'll be able to make heads or tails of it some day. Now that you've seen it, we better blot it out. I didn't mention it to Getty, and I warned these Mexicans to keep their traps shut. God knows it won't be worth nothin' to us if any talk about it gits around."

With Bob and Luis looking on, the sheriff erased the markings with the side of his boot.

"By the way," said Bob, "we stopped at the undertaker's for a minute. We asked him about Tom's watch. He told us he hadn't seen it; that you must have it here."

"I only wish I had!" Childress growled. "I know what that Wells, Fargo watch meant to Tom, and what it would mean to you boys. But those miserable skunks wasn't satisfied with killin' Tom, they was low-down enough to take his watch!"

"That was low-down, for sure!" Luis burst out bitterly. "I'm promising you now, Buck, Bob and me will chase the rat that took it all the way to hell and back, if we have to go that far to catch up with him!"

"I don't know, Luis," the sheriff declared weightily. "I'm thinkin' you'll never see that watch again—not to be able to identify it, I mean. The first thing the party that grabbed it will do will be to use an abrasive and mill off the inscription."

"Let him," Bob Maxwell declared thinly. "Tom put his own mark on that time piece. I'd recognize it now or ten years from now. Between the watch and this left-handed gun stuff, we've got a little to work on. Buck, you figure these blacklegs are part of the crowd that hangs out in Wild Horse?"

"Sure! That's where they came from and that's where they are right now. But there's a hundred of their kind out there, comin' and goin' all the time. It wouldn't do no good for me to go lookin' for them; they'd be tipped off before I got within ten miles of town that I was around, and they'd slip across the line into Arizona and stay there till I pulled out. There's some honest men doin' business in Wild Horse, but they're afraid to give me any information; the rest are just as crooked as the scum that trades with 'em. I aim to do what I can about snaggin' the rats who killed Tom, and I'll go about it in my own way. That may not be good enough for you; I know you want action."

Luis left it for Bob to answer for them.

"We appreciate what you're up against, Buck. Suppose you play it your way and we'll do the same. We know this deal isn't going to be squared tomorrow or the next day. But it's going to be squared. We'll drift out into that country the first of the week and catch on with some cow outfit."

Childress realized the futility of trying to persuade them to reconsider their decision. And yet he felt compelled to say, "The two of you have been doin' well where you are. You especially, Bob—foreman of a fine spread, with a chance to start runnin' some stuff of your own. You're goin' to throw that all away. Another job like that may never come your way again."

"I'm not worrying about that, Buck," Bob said with quiet determination. "Luis and I have got our job cut out for us and we'll stay with it till it's finished."

"All right, if that's how you see it." Childress gave his gun belt a hitch that settled it more comfortably. "We'll gather up Tom's personal effects; you can take 'em into town. That sawed-off shotgun was his; he carried it for years. I imagine he'd want you to have it, Bob."

Bob Maxwell said with a deep gravity, "And I'll keep it close to me, Buck. Tom can't speak but if I can arrange it, his gun will speak for him."

Chapter Two

Outlaws' Capital

MATT GARNER, a squat and white-haired man, with a face as round as an apple and brown as a nut, stepped out on the covered gallery of the 7-11 house and called across the ranch yard to his new rider.

"Maxwell! Come over here!"

As he waited, he screwed up his eyes in a characteristic squint and from long habit studied the country rolled out below. The flat lands swam in the blue haze of the new day and the little town of Wild Horse, miles away, danced vaguely on the horizon.

Matt had come early to western Mescalero County, and he had chosen well. Backed up against the San Rafael Range, the hot southwest winds that scorched lower ranges could not reach

him, and he had native grama that stayed green most of the year. Best of all, he had water; the Rio Dolores—it was river only when in flood and in any other country would properly have been called creek—cut down across his range for several miles before making its big turn to Wild Horse and the west. It enabled him to run more cattle than any two of his neighbors.

"Yore brother show up?" he asked Bob.

"Not yet. I expected him last evening. He wrote that he'd be here; I can't imagine what's holding him up."

"We could use him tomorrow," said Matt. "Some of our stuff is driftin' purty far west. If we don't turn it back on our own grass, Diamond and a Half will do it for us— You told him how to git here?"

"I told him to turn into the hills when he reached the river and he'd find 7-11 up on the bench."

Bob had been riding for the brand for three weeks. After giving it some thought, Luis and he had changed their plans and he had ridden into this Wild Horse country alone. His coming had gone unnoticed. Only Matt Garner knew why he was there. Having shown himself to be a top man, the old cowman had told him to send for Luis.

"That was plain enough," Matt muttered. "I hope he didn't take it into his head to go on into town—lookin' for trouble or fun."

"He wouldn't go in alone, knowing I'm here and that the two of us would have plenty chances to go in together. As for fun," Bob added thinly, "if that's what he was looking for, he wouldn't have tossed up his job at Blue Mesa and headed in this direction."

"You needn't be so quick on the trigger with me," the old man snapped; he wasn't in the habit of being pulled up short by his crew. "If I'm a bit concerned this mornin', you can blame yoreself. You put your cards on the table with me, when you showed up. I told you then that I'd do all I could to help you square Tom's account."

"I didn't mean to rub you the wrong way," Bob said apologetically. "I know you're for me, and I appreciate it. As for Luis, I'm not worried; I'm sure he'll show up before evening."

"Like as not he will," Matt conceded, "but after breakfast you throw a saddle on a bronc and ride down the river as far as the road. Stick around the ford till you see him. The westbound stage will be goin' through in about an hour. If there's been any trouble back along the line, whoever's drivin' will give you the news."

Bob started across the yard, only to have Matt call him back.

"When you and the boys were in town the other night, you didn't see anythin' of the party yo're lookin' for, eh?"

"No, I didn't expect to be that lucky. It's going to take time, Matt—a long time, judging by what I saw. Buck Childress didn't tell us the half of it when he said Wild Horse was overrun with gunmen and outlaws. Where do they all come from, Matt?"

"From as far away as the Little Rockies, up in Montana. You've heard of the Hole in the Wall, the Lost Cabin country, Brown's Park on the Green—the Robber's Roost across the line in Utah?"

"Yeh—"

"Wal, that's the Owlhoot Trail, for you, and the capital of it is right here in Wild Horse. It ain't no real trail,

of course, and it never was; them places are just wilderness hide-outs where a blackleg can always find grub and shelter and a fresh hoss. When they got money to spend, Wild Horse is where they head."

"Buck must know it," Bob suggested. "He's been around a long time."

"Sure he knows it! So do the U. S. Marshals and the Pinkertons. They show up ever' so often, but they never git the man they're after. I've seen Butch Cassidy, the leader of the Wild Bunch, Harvey Logan, the Sundance Kid, a dozen others, with rewards on 'em runnin' into the thousands, strut-tin' around Wild Horse. They never get picked up; somebody always tips them off. It's no secret that some of the money they throw away in the honky-tonks and saloons is the loot from train robberies and bank holdups as far off as Wyomin' and Montana. Nobody used to care; we figgered it wasn't our money. By gravy, that was our mistake! Look at what we've got now! The damnedest collection of gun slingers, horse thieves, rustlers, and cowboys gone bad that a man ever saw!"

If Matt's tone was bitter, it was understandable. There wasn't a foot of barbed wire around Wild Horse. Cattle were run on unprotected open range. Rustlers had easy pickings. Hog Smith, the reputed king of the rustlers, and other organized gangs took heavy toll of the big outfits. 7-11, being the biggest, had suffered the most.

Rustlers didn't bother with rewriting brands and waiting for the new ones to heal. The piñon-clad lower reaches of the Continental Divide were handy. Beyond those serrated ridges was Arizona and its mining camps where beef sold at a premium, and no questions asked. It was as easy as that.

The cook came to the door and rang the breakfast bell. The crew, waiting for its summons, began filing into the big dining-room.

"We better go in, too," the old man said, thinking of something else. "What I been sayin' wasn't meant to discourage you; I reckon you know yo're lookin' for a needle in a haystack. That's about what I'm doin'. It don't do no good for me to string up a rustler; there always seems to be two poppin' up to take his place. The only way to lick this proposition is for us cowmen to organize and declare war on that whole damn bunch of snakes!"

"I don't suppose you could count on much support from Wild Horse," Maxwell remarked.

"Not a bit!" Matt declared emphatically. "It's like Buck told you—there's some honest folks there but they don't dare to open their mouths. When the toughs put Shep Smiley up for town marshal and that slobberin' old drunk Ben East for justice of the peace, decent people was afraid to vote against 'em." He shook his head grimly. "No, there ain't a thing they can do with that gang of gunmen and cutthroats crackin' the whip around their ears!"

Matt Garner was not exaggerating. But he was speaking only of the town's so-called "white" citizens. If things were intolerable for them, they were incredibly worse for its swarthy-skinned Spanish-Americans, who outnumbered them five to one. Fearful of their lives, they went about their hum-

ble tasks, suffering in silence the contempt and indignities heaped on them. Even Padre Donates, for all his age and holy office, was not always safe from the ribaldry and scorn of the lawless.

There was one, however, who was an artist who worked in silver and leather. Antonio Sandoval fashioned boots and saddles of a fineness that could not be equalled, tanning his own leather and from native bar silver tooling conchas so beautiful that even a gun-slinging desperado could appreciate their excellence, and it was the dream of many to have him make for them a saddle or pair of boots that would be the everlasting envy of their fellows.

This morning, after he had said Mass, Padre Donates began his daily round of visiting the sick and infirm among his parishioners. The ancient adobe church, with its walled yard, stood on a little eminence at the head of the ribbon of tawny dust that was the main street of Wild Horse. A beaten path soon brought him to the plank sidewalk of the business section.

The town was half frame, half adobe. In the piercing, unflattering light of morning it looked stark and unlovely. The hour was so early that the little army of thugs and blacklegs who had caroused all night was not yet astir, however, and the air was peaceful, reminding him of days that he had come to regard as gone forever.

At the sun-blistered, neglected Barrett House, Wild Horse's only hotel, and a place of evil repute, the porter, armed with a bucketful of water and a stiff brush, was industriously scrubbing the steps.

Sometime after midnight a drunken row in the hotel's barroom had moved out to the steps. There, in a burst of gunfire, the life of one of the disputants, a lesser light in the outlaw firmament, had been snuffed out.

Manuelito, the porter, a dwarfish little man with a deformed foot, was not aware of the priest's approach until the latter addressed him. He straightened at once and removed his hat respectfully.

"You scrub the steps too clean, Manuelito," Padre Donates observed, in Spanish. "The sight of a little blood might help these lawless ones to consider the enormity of their many crimes."

Manuelito lifted his shoulders in an apologetic shrug. "I do only what I am told to do, Father. I do not try to understand these gringos; I try only to keep my job. I have six little ones to feed, and they are always hungry, Father."

The brown-robed Franciscan nodded understandingly, and with a smile. He knew it was not from choice that the cripple labored here, enduring the abuse of Cap Null, the proprietor, and regularly made the butt of the rough and cruel humor of the wild crew that patronized the unsavory establishment.

He said, "Don't misunderstand me, my son; I am not displeased with you. Take all the dollars you can get from these evil ones. You will be underpaid and mistreated. That should make you despise them the more."

Giving him his blessing, he continued on his way, leaving a sadly puzzled Manuelito to return to his scrubbing.

Beyond the clustered stores and saloons of the business section proper stood the shop of Antonio Sandoval, a white-washed, thick-walled building, its plainness relieved only by the protruding *vigas* of its flat roof and the iron grilles that protected its deep,

narrow windows. There was a walled yard in the rear. A young woman, leading a saddled pony, emerged from it and, tethering the animal at the rack in front of the shop, hurried inside.

Padre Donates quickened his step on catching sight of her. He reached the door a minute or two later, and as he pushed it open, a bell tinkled cheerfully above his head—an arrangement that always notified Antonio Sandoval that someone had entered the shop. He lived in the rear with his son, a boy of twelve, and his daughter. He was in back this morning. Hearing the bell, he looked in.

"You, Father!" he cried happily. "This is a pleasure! You are just in time to have coffee with me. Come back, please! We will sit at the table and have a long talk."

"Tonio, that's Pia's mare at the rack. I saw her a few moments ago, dressed for riding. Where, may I ask, is she off to this morning?"

"The Taylor ranch. Their little Margarida has been so sick. It's the child's birthday. Pia has made up a basket of toys and—some cakes and er—candy."

The lean old Franciscan shook his head disapprovingly. "Pia is no longer a child; she is a young woman—a very beautiful young woman. We are old friends, Tonio, so I speak frankly. It is a long ride to the Taylors. Have you asked yourself if she will be safe?"

"Please don't distress yourself, Father; Pia is safe wherever she goes," Antonio Sandoval declared confidently. He was a merry little man who laughed easily. "No one will harm her. The girl is an angel."

"And there are men base enough to look with lust on even an angel."

"Even so, no one would dare to lay a hand on her," the little man insisted. "There isn't a renegade in Wild Horse but knows she is my daughter. Time after time, the leaders among them have assured me that my children will never be molested. You know how they beg me to make this or that for them and let me charge whatever I please. The worst fool among them knows that if he should forget himself he would have to answer to them."

Padre Donates continued to shake his head.

"I know in what esteem these desperados hold you. There was a time when they came here only to amuse themselves; they bothered no one; there was no local outlawry. That is no longer true; there is rustling, armed robbery, stagecoaches stopped every few days, murder. Still another killing at the Barrett House last night. A new brand of vermin has moved in; the men who were big even in their badness have gone."

He wasn't finished, but he checked himself as the door opened and Pia stepped in. She was, as he had said, a remarkably beautiful young woman, barely turned twenty-one. She had the perfect features of the well-bred woman of her race. Her hair, blacker than midnight, was pulled back sharply from her young face, flattering her loveliness. There was a light in her liquid dark eyes, however, that suggested that if she were an angel, she was an angel with a will of her own.

Padre Donates was too frequent a visitor for her to be surprised at finding him there this morning. With a graceful genuflection, she greeted him cheerily. She was in a gay mood and eager to be off. Her quick glance ran from the priest to her father and though she sensed that there was a difference of opinion between them,

she did not let it dampen her spirits.

"Another argument, I see," she said lightly. "It's getting late; I'll leave you to finish it at your leisure. The coffee is on the table."

She had been away to a convent in Santa Fe and spoke English as fluently as her native Spanish. Padre Donates stopped her as she would have passed.

"Just a moment, Pia; our argument concerns you. I understand you are off for the Taylor ranch. I question the propriety of your going so far alone."

"So that's it!" Pia said laughingly. "You worry needlessly, Father. As I have so often heard you say, 'God goes with the righteous'—and so does my gun."

"Your gun? Do you mean to tell me you carry a gun?"

"In my saddlebag."

"And you mean to say you would use it?"

Pia snapped her fingers. "Like that—if the occasion demanded."

Padre Donates sighed heavily. "How will you go?"

"I'll take the road east and cross the river at the ford. I'll be at the Taylors thirty minutes later."

"Very well," the good man gave in grudgingly. "Go with my blessing."

Pia gave her father's cheek a peck and hastened out to her pony. Since she always rode sidesaddle, she wore a wide, weighted skirt of black woolen, so lightly woven that it was not uncomfortable on the hottest days. It was so long that it made her look taller than she was. Her tight-fitting black-velvet *chaqueta*, buttoned to the throat, with only the cuffs and collar of her white lace *jubón* showing, revealed the slimness of her waist and the modest fullness of her breasts. A jaunty *toquilla*, fashioned of the same material as her jacket, with a trailing ostrich plume to enliven it, rested securely on her head.

Encumbered by her basket, she had to use the block to mount. Settling herself comfortably in the heavy saddle, she loped up the street. Heads were turned as she passed. Even old Manuelito paused in his labors to gaze after her.

Though she had gone, the spell of her remained with the aged Franciscan.

"There is something very compelling about her, Tonio," he mused. "I do not know whether it is a great courage I see in her eyes or just impishness. But she is truly a remarkable young woman."

Antonio Sandoval laughed heartily. "She had a remarkable mother, Father."

"I daresay! It is my regret that I was not privileged to know your Maria. But lead the way to the coffee; I have some other calls to make this morning."

It was a comfortable room to which Antonio Sandoval led him, cool during the hottest days of summer. An open fireplace warmed it in winter.

"Where is the boy this morning?" Padre Donates inquired, as he stirred his steaming cup.

"At the river—swimming with the other children. The Sisters tell me he does well in school."

"He is a good boy, Sixto. I see you in him in many ways, Tonio. Soon he'll be old enough for you to teach him his trade."

"No, Father, I don't want him to work with leather; I want him to paint: to be a great artist."

The little man opened a window.

The distant laughter and whooping of children at play drifted in. "There must have been a storm in the mountains during the night; the river is running high."

The Rio Dolores could be seen, sparkling in the sun as it ran over its white sands.

"You should have thought of the river before Pia left," Padre Donates complained. "If the ford is high, it will be dangerous for her to cross."

Her father was not disturbed. "Piadosa knows the moods of the Rio Dolores. If she finds it's running too high for safety, she will turn back."

He resumed his seat at the table and refilled his guest's cup.

"Piadosa," the good man murmured reflectively. "I've often wondered about it. That is not a saint's name, Tonio."

"No, it's a name her mother found in a book. My Maria, God rest her soul, was very romantic, Father." He filled his saucer and sipped the hot coffee in silence for a moment. "I remember when the baby was christened. It was in Santa Fe, at the church of San Miguel, Father Beltram was there at the time. He said as you do, 'Piadosa—I can not christen this child Piadosa; that is not a saint's name. You are called Maria. If Maria Piadosa will satisfy you, that you can have.'"

Antonio Sandoval laughed heartily at the old memory. "Maria told him she would settle for that, Father. So Maria Piadosa it is."

The bell tinkled in the shop. The little man excused himself. He was gone only a few minutes.

"It was the one they call Hog Smith," he explained, his tone ripe with disgust. "Come for a pair of boots I am making for him. I told him to come back day after tomorrow. I would have finished them this afternoon if he hadn't been so surly. He is well named Hog Smith, the drunken swine!"

Padre Donates nodded in agreement. "He is a loathsome creature. And he grows bolder by the day." He spread his thin hands hopelessly. "What is to be the end of all this?"

"Don't despair, Father," Antonio Sandoval protested. "There will be an end to it. This Hog Smith may prove to be our salvation. I wish him luck with his rustling."

The padre's head came up in surprise and he gazed at his old friend askance. "What do you mean?"

"Father, the man's boldness will be the undoing of every renegade in Wild Horse. The rustling is bad now. It will get worse; Hog Smith and his cattle thieves will go too far one day, and stockmen like Matt Garner and Reb Taylor and half a dozen others will decide that it's time for them to forget their foolish quarrels and stand together. Somewhere, they'll find a leader, and when they do, they'll give this country a housecleaning it will never forget."

Chapter Three

A Good Morning's Work

FOR all its lawlessness this Wild Horse country, with its rugged mountains and verdant valleys, had lost none of the majestic splendor with which it had come fresh from the hands of its Maker. There was a mysterious beauty about its lacework of canyons and wide vistas of tawny flat lands, that stretched away to the

north until one could not be sure where the land ended and the sky began.

This morning, as he struck off down the river, Bob Maxwell told himself he had never known any country so fair. The tang of sagebrush filled the air. Overhead, doves and mountain quail were on the wing. The willow brakes that marked the course of the Rio Dolores were a dark cool green in the shimmering sunlight.

He followed those trees, riding leisurely, his sure-footed bronc raising flock after flock of grouse that had been in to water and were not yet ready to take off for the hills.

Notwithstanding the uneasiness Matt Garner had expressed over Luis's failure to arrive, Bob refused to be alarmed; so many things could have held Luis up for a day or two. He smiled when he thought of how different his brother would find riding for 7-11 from punching cows for a fenced-in outfit in a settled country like Blue Mesa.

It had taken Bob a few days to adjust himself. Though he volunteered no information about himself, he got along with the veteran crew. He didn't doubt that Luis would do the same.

The swift running of a pony drummed on the morning air. It caught Bob's ear and pulled him up with its urgency; a man didn't drive an animal that hard without reason. The pounding hoofs swept nearer, coming from the direction of the ford. Quartering into the willows, he waited, alert and apprehensive.

"No news travels so fast as bad news," he muttered, wondering if it concerned Luis.

A minute or two passed before he saw the rider. It was only seconds then before Bob recognized him. It was Les Quade, a 7-11 man. Bob pushed out.

"The old man at the house?" Quade demanded, reining up. The side of his face was smeared with dried blood where a slug had cut a gash across his right cheek.

"Yeh! I just left him. What happened to you?"

"Rustler lead again! I got caught up in the Three Spring Coulee last night, when that storm broke. To get out of it, I holed up in the old cabin that's up there. It musta been about midnight when the rain stopped and the moon showed up. It was so clear, I figgered I might as well come on down to the house. I hadn't gone half a mile when I spotted a bunch of cows bein' run off." Quade growled a curse. "I should have let them go; one man against four; I didn't have a chance!"

"Did you recognize them, Les?"

"Not for sure, but good enough for me! Some of Hog Smith's crowd. They got their finger in everythin'. I emptied a gun at 'em before I started runnin'. They chased me all over hell!"

"How much did they get away with?"

"There must have been forty head in the bunch when I ran into 'em. I reckon they helped themselves to plenty more after they chased me. This is the second time that bunch has marked me, and I'll get 'em for it, by God!"

Without saying more, he used his spurs and raced on to the house.

The river was still running high when Bob reached the ford but he could see that it was beginning to drop. There was no sign of Luis.

He couldn't say what would come of this latest raid on 7-11. Garner might try to do something about it, but that he could accomplish anything by himself was unlikely. It seemed certain,

however, to strengthen his determination to arouse all stockmen to the necessity of banding together in all out warfare on rustler and outlaw.

You can hit a man in the pocketbook just so often, he meditated, *and then he does something about it. A few weeks, and time will be running against Luis and me. If we can't do any better, we'll get in that fight on the chance that the parties who got Tom will be among the rats who'll be wiped out.*

In the fall, when Diamond and a Half and other brands west of 7-11 were trailing beef cattle to market, the herds were often held here over night. With wood and water handy, the grassy flat beside the ford made an ideal camping-place. The ashes of old fires were everywhere. Some industrious individual had piled several flat rocks on top of one another and made himself a comfortable seat.

Bob helped himself to it, and as he sat there, engrossed with his thoughts, he saw his pony, grazing a few feet away, throw up its head and raise its ears inquiringly. From the direction of Wild Horse, a young woman, mounted on a nicely gaited palomino, was approaching the crossing. She rode at a leisurely pace and with careful attention to the basket she carried on her arm.

It was Pia.

Not realizing that she was being watched, she loped up to the far bank of the Rio Dolores and gazed with dismay at the swift current of the swollen river. Tucking up her long skirt, she urged her pony into the water. Seeing how alarmingly the water rose with every step, she quickly turned back.

Having seen her, Bob Maxwell could not have pulled his eyes away if he had wished. It was not only that he found her beautiful beyond compare but there was a pride and dignity in her that laid a heavy hand on him.

"I'm afraid you'll get a wetting if you try to cross," he called to her as he stepped out into the road.

Pia overcame her surprise. Her shoulders stiffened and her hand went quickly to her saddlebag. Bob smiled to himself.

She carries a gun, he thought. Removing his hat, he said, "I'll be glad to assist you—if you'll permit me."

Pia continued to ignore him. She had no thought of fleeing. On the other hand, she did not intend to enter into conversation with a stranger, though this one, whoever he might be, was good to look at.

With thieves and outlaws abroad in the country, Bob thought he knew what was running through her pretty head. Her coloring, the shape of her face and her dark eyes, suggested that she was of Spanish extraction. Hoping to reassure her, he addressed her in Spanish.

It had an immediate effect on Pia. She nodded graciously. "*Siento en el alma el molestar á Vd, señor.*" And then, in excellent English, she added, "You are very kind."

Bob swung into the saddle and joined her on the opposite approach to the ford.

"If you will take my basket and lead the pony across, I think I can manage to keep my feet out of the water," Pia told him.

"That might be risky," he said. "I'd hate to see you tumble into the river. I better carry you across. I'll come back then for your pony and the basket."

Pia lowered her eyes modestly at the

thought of entrusting herself to his arms. Then, looking up suddenly, she said, "I have never seen you before."

"No, I'm new here. I came out from Las Animas about three weeks ago. I'm riding for 7-11. My name is Bob Maxwell."

"Bob?" she queried, a vague disappointment in her tone.

"Roberto—if you prefer," he said and saw her smile again.

"I am Pia Sandoval. Antonio Sandoval is my father." She mentioned it with pride. "He is famous for the boots and saddles he makes."

Bob nodded. "I've heard Matt Garner speak of him— Shall I get you over?"

"Please," she murmured.

Bob plucked her out of the saddle and carried her across the stream, marveling at how light she was in his arms. Their eyes met and held before he set her down.

"Is it because you are so experienced in rescuing young women in distress that you do it so gracefully?" Pia murmured teasingly.

"No, my lack of experience would surprise you," said Bob, not realizing how sober he sounded.

Without mishap he got Pia's pony and her basket. Cupping his hands to his knee, he helped her to mount.

"When you are next in Wild Horse, you must come to my father's shop," she said. "He will want to thank you for your courtesy to me. You will have no trouble finding it."

"I'm sure I won't," Bob assured her.

With a little wave of her hand Pia loped away. Bob had been so absorbed with her that it was not till now that he saw a horseman bearing down on him with an extra bronc on a lead rope. A glance was enough to tell him it was Luis. The latter raised his hat to Pia, but she passed him without glancing to right or left.

"Well, you seem to be having a pleasant time of it out here," Luis declared with an impudent grin, as he gazed down from the saddle at his brother. "I'm sorry I didn't get here a little sooner."

"You got here soon enough for me," Bob replied, with a shade of annoyance as his gaze followed Pia.

"You sound a bit touchy," Luis persisted with his teasing. "Who is that pretty little *muchacha?*"

"Pia Sandoval. The name wouldn't mean anything to you now. Maybe it will after you've been around here awhile."

"An old friend?"

"No, this was the first time I ever saw her. It won't be the last— Where have you been? I expected you last evening."

"I got tired of waiting around Las Animas to hear from you," Luis said frankly. "There was a chance for me to take out the Datil stage—Getty had a man sick—so I took the job. Your letter was waiting for me when I got back to town. I started as soon as I got it. Have you got a line on anyone?"

Bob said no. "The best news I've got for you is that no one's paid any attention to me. If I had gone into Wild Horse and hung out in the saloons, somebody might have begun asking questions. This way—working for 7-11—I'm just a cowhand. That's the way both of us have got to play it, Luis. I don't want you to try to pump anybody. Matt Garner knows why we're here, and he's the only man who does. I see you brought the blue roan along."

"He's the smartest cow pony I ever owned," Luis declared. "I wasn't going

to leave him behind. What sort of an outfit is this 7-11?"

"You'll find it all right after you get used to it. You'll do more riding than you ever did around Blue Mesa. We had a bunch of stock run off last night and a man shot up."

"What's the old man going to do about it?"

"I imagine we'll find out when we hit the house."

The briefing Bob gave his brother as they went up the river left Luis without a trace of cockiness. The news that greeted them when they rode into the ranch yard had a further sobering effect.

Contrary to Bob's expectations, the yard was deserted. The broncs that had stood at the bunkhouse hitch rack when he left were not there now. Garner's long-legged bay gelding was missing from the horse corral.

"That's strange—no one around," said Bob. "I can't believe Matt pulled out with the whole crew to chase rustlers who had a ten-hour start on him. Something's happened."

Across the yard, the cook ran out on the gallery and waved his arms excitedly for them to come over.

"The boss left word if you showed up you was to git up to Picacho Canyon as fast as you could! He said you could git acrost the river at the upper ford!"

Honey Winters had been cooking for 7-11 for twenty years. He was an obese, loose-tissued man with an asthmatic wheeze. When excited, as he was now, his flabby torso heaved with every word.

"Why Picacho Canyon?" Bob demanded.

"They got them rustlers treed! It's the bunch Les Quade ran into last night! There's shootin' up there! You can hear it! Listen!—Did you catch it?"

Bob and Luis heard distant puffs of sound that both recognized as gunfire. It came from the direction of Picacho Canyon. Bob couldn't understand it.

"Honey, let me get this straight. Les told me he was crossing the big coulee when he bumped into trouble. That's miles west of the canyon. It was about midnight. By now, those birds should be halfway to Arizona. What are they doing up toward the peaks?"

Honey had the answer. "They got cut off! Diamond and a Half got wind that those gents was in the hills. Coulter figgered they was after his beef. He was out all night with his crew. It was jest breakin' day, when they spotted 'em, up to'd Apache Pass. Coulter was here less'n an hour ago. He said he didn't know till he closed in on the skunks that it was 7-11 cows they was runnin' off."

"Diamond and a Half tangled with them, eh?" Light was beginning to break on Bob.

"Damn me if they didn't!" Honey replied violently. "Musta been on general principles; Coulter's never done us any favors. He cut those birds off and turned 'em back this-a-way. When the rustlers saw what they was up against, they dropped the cows and made a run for it. One got away. Diamond and a Half has got the other three penned up in the canyon."

Bob didn't wait to hear any more. Hurrying across the yard with his brother, he said, "Put your saddle on the blue roan, Luis; I'll drop your roll in the bunkhouse."

Half an hour's hard riding brought them to Picacho Canyon. They had continued to hear sputtering gunfire

on the way up. Now, all was quiet. They understood the reason for that heavy stillness the moment they rounded a bend in the canyon. Under the convenient limb of a dead cottonwood, three men sat on their ponies, hands tied behind their backs. If their faces were grim and sullen, it was understandable, for each had a noose around his neck. 7-11 and Diamond and a Half stood around in a circle, tight-lipped and sober.

Two of the rustlers had been wounded in the fight. One of Jim Coulter's men had caught a slug in the shoulder. Old Matt and Coulter stood in the center of the circle, lips barely moving as they conferred. Finally, it was over and Matt turned to the three doomed men.

"You fellas was caught redhanded, so there's no need for you to feel sorry for yoreselves. If you got anythin' to say, now is the time to say it."

The three men eyed him in stony silence.

"You can buy some time for yoreselves if you'll jest tell us where you was to meet Hog Smith."

"Stop waggin' yore jaw and git this over with!" one of the three, a heavy-jawed redhead snarled. Matt didn't hesitate.

"Okay, boys!" he called out.

Les Quade and two others raised their coiled lariats and brought them down on the rumps of the unsuspecting broncs with stinging force. The animals bolted at once, tossing the condemned men into the air. When they fell, it was with force enough to break their necks.

Though the men approved the action that had been taken, they were glad to turn away. Only Les Quade was unmoved by the three stiffening figures that dangled from the limb of the old cottonwood. He had tasted their fire and his grudge was personal.

Luis's fingers closed on Bob's arm. "Do you see what I see? On the redhaired one."

"Yeh," Bob answered. "I got it right away. Holster on the left hip. It's open in front. That means he wasn't left-handed; he went across the stomach for his gun. I'll see if Les knows anything about him."

"Sure, I knew him!" Les growled. "The three of 'em have been hangin' out in Wild Horse for a year or more. It was the redhead who clipped me last night."

"What was he called, Les?"

"Red Haney. That's the only name I ever heard." His venomous hatred of the dead man contorted Les Quade's scarred face. "He's a purty bastard, ain't he? I'd like to drag him into town and toss him on the hotel steps for Hog Smith to see!"

That was of no interest to Maxwell. Hoping to draw Quade out, he said, "You've got him down for just a rustler. Maybe he went in for bigger game —like sticking up a stage."

"No, he didn't rate nothin' like that," Les jeered. "He was jest a punk." He gave Bob a quick glance. "Why do you ask? You ain't had no stagecoaches stuck up, have you?"

Bob managed a dissembling laugh. "Getty and Wadell have, Les. I was just wondering."

"Well, you're wastin' your time; all three of these birds was satisfied to take whatever Hog Smith threw their way. They didn't have a thing on 'em—not even money. I reckon that tells you what they was."

Bob was satisfied to let it go at that; he had learned enough to satisfy him

that Red Haney was not the man he wanted.

The Diamond and a Half crew was already moving down the canyon. Coulter tarried for a word with Matt.

"You get some of your boys over my way this afternoon and round up your cows," Bob overheard him saying. "Grass is grass with me."

"It'll be attended to," Matt assured him. "I'll be pushin' all our stuff this way a bit tomorrow. This was a good morning's work, Jim. You can see what we can do when we pull together. We're jest plain damned fools, you and me and Reb Taylor and the rest of us, to go on the way we been."

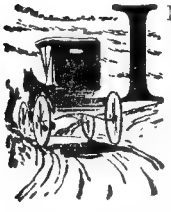
"I don't know whether anythin' can be done or not," Coulter declared skeptically. "I'm willin' to let bygones be bygones; but how are you goin' to get Reb Taylor and Orv Pickett to sit down together? That goes for Big John Moffat, too; that old highbinder won't listen to nobody."

"It's worth tryin', Jim," Matt insisted.

"All right, go ahead! Call a meetin'! If you can get the rest to pull in their horns and line up together, you can count on me."

Chapter Four

The One Who Got Away



IN SPITE of the fact that Matt Garner had title to over twenty thousand acres of rangeland, it didn't stop him from claiming rights to lands that were in the public domain. Diamond and a Half did the same, and so did every other outfit in the Wild Horse country. If a man got there first, the range he used was recognized as his by his neighbors. At least that was supposed to be the way of it. This arrangement, often violated, was responsible for most of the feuds and bitter feelings that kept Matt and his neighbors apart.

His cows had been drifting Coulter's way for weeks. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have moved them an inch. But he was anxious now to have Diamond and a Half support, so he ordered the crew out the following day and pushed his cattle back. To be sure that the job was done to his satisfaction, he superintended it himself.

"He ain't fooling," Luis told Bob. "It won't be his fault if he doesn't get something organized. A showdown is coming, sure enough. And what a showdown it'll be!"

Matt sent a load of lumber up to Three Spring Coulee and had the old cabin made habitable. Supplies followed. Two men were stationed there, then. It was lonely work. To make it less onerous, the old man ruled that the whole crew would take turns at it. Bob was glad that Luis and he had not been asked to stand the first trick. He was anxious to see Pia again.

It was the end of the month. According to bunkhouse gossip, Matt always gave a few men some time off. Luis mentioned it on the way to the house this morning.

"If we're lucky enough to get into town, I know where you'll head for, first off. What are you going to tell her father? He'll want to know something about you."

"Of course he will," Bob agreed. "Be strange if he didn't. I'll take him as I find him and be guided accordingly."

At breakfast Matt told the crew to come into the office for their wages

when they finished eating.

Les Quade walked in with Bob and Luis. Though Les had not seen a doctor, his slashed cheek was healing. A solution of creosote—sheep dip, no less—was the only medication it had received.

"Matt, I'm headin' for town, if it's all right with you," Les announced, as he pocketed his money. "I got a day off comin' to me."

"Go ahead!" the old man told him. "The three of you can go in if you like. You can tend to a couple things for me, Bob. I'd advise you boys to keep an eye peeled while yo're in Wild Horse. You can be sure what happened up in the canyon is well known around town by now. I'm speakin' mostly to you, Les. When you git likkered up, you'd spit in a tiger's face."

The doughty little man laughed thinly. "I ain't goin' in lookin' for trouble, Matt. But I ain't walkin' wide of that scum, neither. Come on, Bob! If you and Luis are goin' to side me in, find out what Matt wants you to do and let's git goin'."

Luis was just as eager to be off as Les.

"If you fellows are in that much of a hurry, you better pull out by yourselves," Bob told them. "I'm going to take a dip in the river and treat myself to a shave."

"Hell's fire!" Les protested, "you don't have to dude up to go into Wild Horse! You can git a shave and a hot bath in Charley's place for two-bits!"

"Suit yourself about that," said Bob.

The upshot of it was that all three went to the river together. This wasn't the first time that Les Quade had bent his will to Bob's. The latter often wondered about the fiery little man, who had no friends among the 7-11 crew and boasted that he wanted none. No longer young, his hard-bitten face was dark with the hatreds that had been tearing at him for years.

Though Bob had never gone out of his way to cultivate Les, the latter had unconsciously attached himself to him, a fact that would have surprised Les, had he been aware of it, for it was not in his nature to swear allegiance to any man.

It was after eight by the time they headed downriver. As usual, Bob carried Tom's sawed-off shotgun in his saddle boot.

"Maxwell, are you gunnin' for somebody—always packin' that cannon under your leg?" Les demanded.

Bob turned the query with a laugh. "It's a comforting feeling to know it's there, Les. I figure I might need it some time."

"Ask dumb questions and you git dumb answers!" Les growled, realizing that he had been rebuffed. "Forgit that I asked!"

Minutes later, he tried again. "Years ago, when I was workin' for the V T Bar, over in Lincoln County, a couple boys caught on with the outfit," he declared, seemingly apropos of nothing. "They knew how to work cattle; they could ride and rope with the best of us. They was there about three months. You know what they turned out to be?"

"No."

"A couple deputy U. S. marshals. The man they wanted rode in one day, and they grabbed him."

Bob smiled at the little man's ingenuousness.

"I hate to disappoint you, Les, but the shoe doesn't fit. I guarantee you we won't turn out to be a couple of marshals."

In a small community like Wild Horse, where running water was available, it was the custom for young women and old to carry their laundry to the river's edge and do their washing there. The main street ended at the Rio Dolores, several hundred yards beyond Antonio Sandoval's shop. Where the stream was shallow it was studded with boulders that made convenient drying-places.

Every morning a laughing, chattering throng gathered there, with children cavorting in the water and raising a din with their shrill voices. There one could hear the news and gossip of the town as nowhere else.

There were numerous women of Pia's acquaintance who washed for others. Her father had often urged her to have one of them do the work. She always refused; the three or four hours a week she spent at the river were altogether too pleasant to be done away with so lightly.

This morning, however, (guided by some sixth sense, she told herself afterward) she remained at home. When her father stepped in for his late-morning coffee he found her wearing her newest black silk skirt and a ruffled waist of Valenciennes lace that left her shoulders bare. She had piled her hair high on her head and given it more than its usual care.

"I see!" he exclaimed, with a knowing smile. "You think he may come this morning."

"You tease me, Father," she protested. "It's been five days. I am no longer concerned about him. If he never comes—"

"I know," he interjected. "If he never comes, you won't mind at all. That's what young women have been saying ever since the world began." Putting on a straight face, he added, "I agree with you; he is not worth thinking about. Now that that's been taken care of, may I have my coffee, Pia?"

He was acquainted with what had been done in Picacho Canyon and what had led to the action taken there. He never brought such tales to Pia's ears; when she heard of such things, she heard them from others. There was another reason for his silence this time. According to report a 7-11 man had been wounded. Whether or not it was the Roberto Maxwell she had met at the ford, he did not know, and he preferred to let time supply its own answer.

After she had filled her father's cup, Pia went to the side window, which gave a limited view of the street. She had stood there but a few minutes when she turned away with an excited cry.

"Father! He is here! But *Madre de Dios*, there are two of him! I wanted only one!"

"They are twins, you mean?"

"I don't know! They must be brothers—so much alike! Quick, Father! Go into the shop! Give me time to put on fresh coffee and set out the good china and some cake—"

"Of course!" Antonio Sandoval laughed disarmingly. "How quickly you change your mind, my little dove! A moment ago you didn't care if you never saw him again. I—"

"Father, I'll never forgive you if you say another word!" Pia cried, the pulse

in her cheek beating madly. "Please go!"

"This is my brother Luis," Bob said, after he had made himself known to Pia's father.

"You could hardly deny it," Antonio responded happily. "It is as I thought—you are the brothers of Tomás Maxwell."

Bob and Luis did not attempt to dissemble their surprise.

"You knew Tom?" Bob asked.

"When he worked for the Bernals, at San Jacinto. My mother was a Bernal; I used to visit at the ranch. That was before Tomás went to work for Wells, Fargo. Of late, whenever I went to Las Animas, I used to see him at Alamosa. He spoke of you and how well you were doing. Then I heard he had been killed."

"A little over a month ago," said Bob.

"And now the two of you are here, working for cowboy wages." The little saddlemaker shook his head grimly. "I am sure I know why. It couldn't be for any other reason."

Bob drew himself up stiffly. "Perhaps the less said about that the better."

"That is true," Antonio agreed. "Especially must we say nothing to Pia. As for me, have no fear, my friends; I will guard your secret. I may even be able to help you. I have no doubt that the man who killed your brother has stood where you stand now. These desperados all come here at one time or another. It shouldn't be difficult to run him down."

"What makes you say that?" Luis asked.

"First, you fit the job to the man, Luis. That rules out all but a few. Desperados stick to their trade the same as other men. A rustler sticks to his rustling; he doesn't rob banks and stop trains. When it comes to banditry, you've got to separate it into two classes. On one hand you've got the big men among these desperados, the elite; men like Butch Cassidy. They wouldn't be bothered with holding up a stagecoach or taking a man's purse; they play only for high stakes. Then there's the common blackleg. No job's too small for him; he'll kill to take a dollar. How much did the express company lose at Alamosa?"

"About four thousand dollars," said Bob.

"Did the bandits have any reason to think they would find more?"

"I don't believe so. Bullion shipments went through there, but they were heavily guarded."

"Then you can be sure the station was raided by some second-rate gang. Your brother was killed by a tinhorn—by some cheap badman who is trying to make a name for himself."

Bob found Antonio Sandoval's logic as enlightening as it was unorthodox. Luis was equally impressed.

"Does the description fit anyone in particular?" he asked.

The little saddlemaker lifted his hands in a regretful gesture. "How can I say? It fits anyone of a dozen. But here comes Pia! We'll have to speak of this another time."

Bob found Pia more lovely than ever.

"We were fortunate enough to get the day off," he told her. "This is the first chance I've had to get to town."

It was his way of apologizing for his tardiness in accepting her invitation. Pia's smile was forgiveness enough.

"Think no more of it," she said gaily. "I hadn't expected to see you so soon.

I know there's been trouble again in the hills."

"Some," Bob acknowledged, trying to make light of it.

"Some, you say?" Pia's tone said that she knew otherwise. "I heard that a 7-11 man was wounded. I'm glad to know it was not you or your brother."

Her father gazed at her in amazement. "You knew about this?"

"That needn't surprise you," Pia protested mischievously. "The town is buzzing about it, Father. How could I help knowing?"

"So!" he exclaimed, looking very wise. "Since you are so well informed, my pretty one, have you been told that these young men and I are not exactly strangers?"

Pia's quick glance flashed from her father to Bob. "Can this be true—or is he making game of me?"

"Your father was acquainted with our brother Tom and heard him speak of us," Bob answered, with a smile, amused by the good-natured bantering of the Sandovals. "We were as surprised as you are."

"There you are!" Antonio cried, beaming triumphantly. "My poor home is yours, gentlemen! I feel we are old friends already. But let us not stand here. Lead the way, Pia, and we will sit at the table and have coffee while we visit."

It was a pleasant hour that Bob, and Luis as well, were not soon to forget. There was talk of Tom. Antonio Sandoval took charge of it and all Pia was told was that the eldest of the brothers had passed away.

Sixto, Pia's brother, fresh from the river, romped in as they sat at the table. He wanted permission to take his burro out of the yard. His father granted it readily.

"You are to be home by noon," Pia instructed the boy. "And you are to stay this side of the river, Sixto. If the other boys want to ride out to the Whisky Ranch, let them go. You are not to follow. You understand?"

The youngster nodded.

"Very well," Pia told him. "Pour yourself some milk, and you may have a piece of cake."

Cake and milk soon disappeared and Sixto rushed off.

"That's a new one on me—the Whisky Ranch," Bob remarked.

Antonio Sandoval laughed heartily. "You won't find it among the registered brands, my friend. It's no ranch at all. It's the old Dog Iron place, just north of the river. There's nothing left out there but the house and an old stone corral. It's a hangout for thieves and outlaws. I forget who first called it the Whisky Ranch. But it's well named—so much drinking and quarreling go on there. It's a rare night that doesn't end in gunfire."

Bob and Luis were about to leave when Luis showed Antonio a piece of turquoise that he had carried for several years. "It's a small piece, but the copper threads in it are the prettiest I've ever seen."

"It's a beautiful stone," the little man agreed. "You should have it made up into something."

"Could you set it into a neckerchief ring?"

"But of course! Come into the shop, Luis, and I'll show you what I do in silver."

It gave Bob a minute alone with Pia.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

Pia hesitated over her answer. They gazed into each other's eyes as they sat there, and something ran between

them that held them silent for moments.

"Your time is not your own, Roberto," she murmured softly.

"I know—but I'll find some way of getting in."

"Would next week be too soon?"

"Not half soon enough."

"We are celebrating the feast of Our Lady of the Angels next week on Friday," she said. "There will be a fiesta in the evening. If you could come then—"

"I'll come—if only for a few hours," he promised.

Bob and Luis were in the shop, on the point of saying farewell to Pia and her father, when a customer opened the door. In a cheap way, he was a handsome man, with an offensive swagger. Judging by the waxed ends of his ridiculously small mustache, he had just come from the barbershop. His vanity found further expression in his gaudily embroidered silk shirt and the horsehair hatband that decorated his flat-brimmed black Stetson.

It was not his finery that claimed the Maxwells' attention. Their eyes were riveted on the man's gun belt. He wore it low, the holster on the left hip, tied down in professional gunman style. It was tilted forward, the ivory-handled butt of a .45 showing.

Bob and Luis had to accept the obvious; the stranger, whoever he was, did not make the left-handed draw; the only way he could get to his gun was across the body. Once again they were confronted with the baffling indefiniteness of the message Tom had left in the dust at Alamosa.

Bidding the brothers to wait, Sandoval excused himself and turned to the newcomer.

"Back again, Doc?" he said, with a minimum of cordiality. "What will it be this morning?"

"Make me a bridle. I want a Spanish bit. I want you to doll it up, Tony. Put some silver on the headstall."

He looked Bob and Luis over as he spoke and had a bold, appraising glance at Pia. Angry resentment whipped through Bob. His face hard and flat, he brushed into the man, forcing him to take a backward step along the counter. The other's right arm twitched suspiciously; he knew he was being called to account.

Pia held her breath. Luis caught her arm and held her where she was. Antonio, busily trying to find a drawing, was unaware that anything was amiss.

The stranger, not too tall, looked up at Bob. He saw something in the latter's lean face that convinced him it would be the part of wisdom to consider the incident closed.

"There you are," Antonio said. He had found the design for which he had been searching. "Is that about what you want, Doc?"

"No, that ain't fancy enough! You made a bridle for Blackie Durant, two or three weeks ago, didn't you?"

"Yes—"

"Well, you make me one like his—only put more silver on it. You needn't worry about the price. Can I get it in a couple days?"

"There's others ahead of you, Doc. You'll have to wait your turn."

"Well, when'll it be ready?"

"Late next week—Friday."

"All right, if that's the best you can do!" the stranger growled.

He swaggered out and disappeared up the street.

Antonio threw up his hands in disgust. "Tinhorn! He's what tinhorn

means to me!"

"Who is he?" Bob demanded.

"Doc Morrell."

"Morrell—" Bob repeated the name, anchoring it in his mind. Forgetting that Pia was present, he said thinly, "He could be the one."

She saw her father nod his head gravely. Thinking she understood, she said, "You mean the one who got away—up in the hills the other night?"

Too late, Bob realized that he had said too much. Pia's father came to his rescue.

"Yes," he declared, "—the one who got away."

He didn't find it necessary to say away from where, or from what.

Chapter Five

Bearding the Lion

THERE was no better place from which to observe the life of Wild Horse than the long veranda of the Barrett House. After Bob had taken care of his errands for Garner, Luis and he had a drink in the hotel bar and then sauntered out on the porch and sat down in a couple of battered chairs.

It was noon already, with the day's business largely over for most of the merchants, many of whom made it a practice to close for several hours during the long, hot afternoons.

Across the way, a sign over a store door read: *J. Pike—General Merchandise.* A ranch wagon was backed up in front, loading supplies. Other wagons had loaded there during the morning, for Jesse Pike did a thriving trade with stockmen, some of them living as far as eighty miles away. Observing the substantial nature of his business and the manner in which it was conducted made it difficult to believe that Wild Horse was infested with outlaws and desperados of every description.

The Maxwells were aware of the slant-eyed scrutiny that was directed at them by the passers-by. That some of them were cowboys like themselves, in town for the day, was obvious enough. But appearances alone were no guide at all in trying to determine who was knave and who was honest man.

"We're just killing time, loafing here," Luis protested, after they had sat there for the better part of an hour. "We won't get a line on Morrell this way."

"I didn't expect to," Bob replied. "I don't know how we're going to get the information we want. We can't go around asking questions; we might be talking to his friends."

"What about Les? He knows Wild Horse."

"Yeh," Bob conceded, "Les might be able to tell us something. But where to find him! Chances are he's down in Rawhide Gulch visiting some woman. There's a hundred of them. To hear him talk, he knows them all."

Rawhide Gulch, with its saloons, gambling-houses and bagnios, lay just over a hill, a three-minute walk from the main street. Though it never really got going until evening, Bob had no intention of trying to find Les among its dives.

"Let it go," he said. "We'll see him this afternoon. The last time I was in, the boys steered me into a tamale parlor, up the street. The place is clean and the food's better than you'd think. Suppose we head for it."

There were three or four men on the veranda. They gave Bob and Luis the same cold scrutiny others had. The brothers returned it with interest. They had no more than reached the sidewalk, when they heard themselves hailed. Turning, they found Les bearing down on them. He had a man with him. Both were somewhat the worse for liquor.

"Look at this!" Les pulled out a handful of ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces. "Purty stuff, ain't it?"

"It sure looks good," Bob admitted. "Where did you stumble onto it, Les?"

"In Queenie Anderson's joint, down in the Gulch. Number seventeen came up four times runnin' for me. Say, I wanta make you acquainted with a friend of mine. This is Johnnie Landers. He's been forkin' a bronc for Big John Moffat for years. Johnnie—Bob and Luis Maxwell."

"Where you bound now?" Bob asked.

"There's a wheel up the street that owes me plenty!" Les declared. "I'm goin' to hit it again. I figger my luck's good enough to beat it today. Come on along and see the fun!"

"Your luck will hold for half an hour," Bob told him. "The two of you string along with us and have something to eat at the tamale parlor. I want to have a little talk with you."

Les was finally persuaded. When they entered the little restaurant, Bob was pleased to find that they had it to themselves.

"Well, fire away!" Les urged, after a plump Mexican woman took their order. "What you got to talk to me about?"

"Les—do you know Doc Morrell?" Bob asked.

"Sure I know him!" The little man's eyes blazed up with hostility. "He's got big ideas, but he don't mean nuthin'. I backed him down one night, right in the hotel. He tried to give me some of his lip, and I wouldn't take it. You have a run-in with him?"

"I'm going to have," Bob muttered. "What's his game, Les?"

"Anythin' that's easy pickin's and not too dangerous. Jesse Pike was stuck up by a couple masked men at the crossin' this spring and relieved of about eight hundred dollars. Jesse didn't do too much yellin' about it, but it got around that he figgered one of the pair was Doc Morrell."

"He doesn't work alone, eh?"

"Hell, I don't know about that!" Les Quade grumbled. "He was a lone wolfer when he showed up in Wild Horse. I notice he's usually got three or four punks taggin' around with him now. Mebbe Morrell's organizin' himself a little gang; some of these crumbs are so thick they'll listen to anythin'."

Though he had been drinking, Les still had his wits about him and it suddenly occurred to him to question Bob's interest in Morrell. "How come you're figgerin' to have trouble with that louse?" he demanded suspiciously.

Bob realized that some sort of an explanation was in order. He related what had taken place in Antonio Sandoval's shop. It convinced Les.

"By grab, you shoulda busted him!" he growled. "He's a worse damn fool than I thought he was, givin' that little lady the eye. The man who offers her an insult is gittin' himself ready for the undertaker— Here's the grub! Let's eat!"

He called for the pepper box and shook a generous amount of the fiery stuff on the back of his left hand. He touched the red pepper with the tip of his tongue and took a mouthful of

food. In that fashion, he proceeded to eat his dinner. It was an old Mexican custom that he had observed below the Border, and a bit of exhibitionism on his part, comparable to asking for chopsticks in a Chinese restaurant.

"Bob, I reckon you and Luis didn't exactly savvy what I said about it not bein' healthy for Morrell or anyone else to git out of order with Antonio Sandoval's daughter," he volunteered, as he dumped a third spoonful of sugar into his cup of chicory-laden coffee. He glanced at his friend Johnnie Landers. "I was tellin' 'em straight, wasn't I?"

"I reckon you was, Les; her old man's got some powerful friends."

"You said it! If you wanted to be safe in this town, do you know the best thing could happen to you, Bob? I'll tell you," he ran on, answering himself; "jest have Little Dick put his finger on you and say, 'I don't want nuthin' to happen to this boy!' That'd come close to doin' it. You hear a lot about Butch and his crowd, but I can tell you Little Dick is the guy all these law busters take their hats off to."

Newspaper nonsense had thrown a veil of romance over the marauding of Little Dick, often called The Ghost of the Cimarron, and his long riders. Heisting banks and stopping trains were their specialty. Whenever the law put them on the dodge, Wild Horse knew them for a month or two.

"'Bout time for him to be showin' up again," Les observed. "When he does, you'll see him sittin' on the hotel porch, readin' a book or somethin'; no boozin' or fancy wimmen for him."

"I seen him play stud all night," Johnnie Landers interjected.

"So have I," said Les. "You know where yo're most likely to find him when he ain't on the porch? In Tony Sandoval's shop. They sit there gabbin' by the hour. They hit it off like they was *compañeros*. You believe that?"

"There's no reason why I shouldn't," Bob replied.

Les wagged his head. "That's the way it is. Morrell knows it. He'll be careful to let this thing drop where it is."

He not only insisted on paying the bill but gave the woman a tip that made her eyes bulge. Nothing would do then but that Bob and Luis accompany Johnnie and him farther up the street to the Elite Saloon.

"I'm goin' to give the tiger's tail another twist," he predicted confidently. "You ain't pullin' out for home now."

With Les and Johnnie leading the way, they went up the street. It gave Luis an opportunity to speak privately to Bob.

"How does the score on Morrell add up now?"

"It adds up to plenty, Luis. I'm not going to jump to conclusions, but what happened at Alamosa fits Doc Morrell like a glove."

Luis nodded woodenly. "That would be my idea. If he doesn't know who we are already, it won't take him long to find out. If he was in on the Alamosa job, he was the head man and certainly the one who shot Tom. When he hears that our name is Maxwell, he'll be wise in a minute to what we're here for."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," said Bob. "I don't believe he knew who Tom was, or anything about him. If he had, it would have scared him off. Don't say anything more to Les; he's told us all he knows. We'll do better if we just saw wood for a time and do some checking of our own."

For half an hour Les won oftener than he lost. His luck turned then and he began to lose steadily. His trips to the bar became more frequent as his winnings dwindled away and he was soon in a snarling temper. Johnnie appealed to Bob.

"Can't you git him out of here before he's broke? He won't listen to me."

"He isn't going to listen to anybody, with the liquor he's got in him. But I'll try—"

Les lost again.

"Come on, Les, don't you think we better find our broncs and head for the ranch? You're losing your shirt."

"It's my shirt!" the little man jerked out fiercely. "I know the way to the ranch, Maxwell! Don't tell me my business!"

Bob tried a second time a few minutes later and with no better luck.

"Git outa here, the pack of you!" Les raged. "I'm sick of the sight of you!"

"All right," Bob gave in. "Have it your way."

On the street, Johnnie said, "He's goin' to git stinkin'. I know him of old. I oughta, the number of times I poured him into the saddle and got him home. He'll be all right if he stays in the Elite."

"What do you mean?" Bob asked.

"Hell, Hog Smith's crowd knows he's in town. I reckon they got you fellas spotted by now. They didn't like what happened up in Picacho Canyon the other mornin'. Any 7-11 or Diamond and a Half man could git into a jam awful easy."

"Does Hog Smith's crowd hang out somewhere along the street?" Bob asked.

"Yeh, across the way in the El Paso Bar. I'll do my damnedest to keep him out of there! When Les gits helpless enough for me to handle, I'll plop him on his hoss and side him out as far as the ford; he'll be able to make it the rest of the way. How long you boys goin' to be around?"

"An hour or so," Bob told him. "We won't be in any hurry to pull out. You stick close to him, Johnnie. Maybe he'll be ready to leave with us."

They parted in front of the Elite and Bob and Luis started back down the street. They had passed only a store or two when four horsemen jogged by them. One was a flabby-looking individual, with sagging jowls and an evil face. The brothers were sharply aware of the slit-eyed hostility with which the fat man and his companions regarded them.

"On a guess," Luis said thinly, "the big guy is our friend Hog Smith."

"Don't look back," Bob advised. "This store window will do as a mirror. Stop here and pretend to be looking at the goods inside."

The window, slanting into the door, served their purpose, and they saw the four men get down in front of the El Paso and enter the saloon.

"That *could* be Hog Smith and some of his crowd," Bob conceded. "I don't believe they've got any intention of tangling with us. That kind seldom comes at you head on, Luis; they prefer to bushwhack a man."

They sauntered along leisurely. In front of the drugstore they saw Les Quade's pony drowsing at the rack. Their own mounts stood a few yards away, exhibiting equal patience.

A gangling man in faded shirt and butternut jeans, lounging against one of the wooden uprights that supported the store's wooden awning, eyed them

with an obscure interest as they approached. Fastened to his suspenders was a nickle-plated badge.

"Mind if I have a word with yuh?" he drawled, as Bob and Luis were about to enter the drugstore.

The badge was identification enough for them; they knew this was Shep Smiley, the town marshal. He had an oily, unwholesome look that fully bore out Matt Garner's opinion of him.

"You can have as many words as you like," Bob returned, his cold glance boring into Smiley. "What is it?"

"I don't recollect seein' the two of yuh around before. Strangers?"

"Not exactly."

The marshal began to bristle. "I saw yuh goin' into the Elite with Les Quade. Friend of yore's?"

"You might say so."

"Do I take it yo're ridin' for 7-11?"

"We seem to be getting some special treatment," said Bob. "Why are you questioning us? You in the habit of taking the pedigree of every man who rides into Wild Horse?"

"Don't git on the prod with me!" Smiley rapped. "If I want to ask yuh some questions, that's my right; I'm responsible for the peace of this town."

Bob grinned unpleasantly. "I hear there ain't no such animal. I'm Bob Maxwell; this is my brother Luis. And we're riding for 7-11. If that's the information Morrell wanted, he's got it."

"Why—why—damn yore hide, I oughta throw yuh in the pokey for that!" the marshal sputtered.

"If he wants any further information," Bob added pointedly, "refer him to Little Dick."

Pretending to have a connection with the outlaw leader was sheer bluff, of course. The effect on the marshal was instant proof that the name was a powerful one. Ignoring the man, Bob motioned to Luis and they went on into the store.

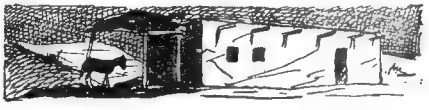
Shep let them go without a word. After standing there snapping his suspenders in impotent wrath, he shuffled off in the direction of the jail.

Luis watched him go. "The peace of the town!" he muttered, with a sarcastic chuckle. "You nailed that, Bob. What gave you the idea Morrell had set him on us?"

"What else could have been behind it? We've been minding our business. He was ready to lock us up till I pulled that Little Dick business on him."

"But how can we make good on it?"

Bob laughed. "We can't—once Little Dick rides in. In the meantime, it'll give Morrell and that worm something to think about."



Johnnie Landers came running across the street as Bob and Luis stood at the trough in front of the blacksmith shop, watering their ponies before jogging out of town. Less than an hour had passed since they left him in front of the Elite. There were unmistakable signs of excitement about him.

"What's Les done now?" Bob snapped.

"The damned fool!" Johnnie got out, breathing hard. "Nothin' would do but he had to bust into the El Paso. He was drunk as a lord. Hog Smith and half a dozen of his bunch was lined up at the bar. They beat hell out of him!"

"Where is he now?"

"Still in there—on the floor at the

back of the saloon—"

Bob's face went grim. "Thank God you caught us! Take these broncs and get his. Wait outside the El Paso. You come with me, Luis."

"What are you going to do?" the latter demanded tightly.

"We're going in there and get him. I'll make the play; you back me up. If you have to use your gun, you know what to do with it."

Bob pushed through the swing doors of the El Paso and reached the bar so quickly that Hog Smith and his men, lined up there, drinking, were caught flat-footed. Something electric swept the saloon and left a charged stillness.

The bar was built in the shape of an L, with the short side parallel with the street. Standing at the short side, Bob had bartender and customers in front of him. They eyed him with a murderous defiance, as rigid as soiled statues as they waited for Hog to take charge. He had a cigarette in his mouth. When he raised his hand to his lips, they knew what was coming. With a deftness the eye could not follow, he caught the glowing butt between thumb and forefinger and snapped it into Bob's face.

It was an old trick, and he was expert at it. The wet paper always held the butt against a man's cheek for a moment, the second he lost in slapping it away was all the advantage Hog wanted. To his surprise, Bob ignored the hot coal searing his flesh and had him and his men covered before they could reach for their guns.

"Put your hands on the bar," he ordered, brushing the butt away. "And keep 'em there. That goes for you in the white apron, too."

The bartender obliged along with the others.

Over his shoulder Bob said, "You got your gun on them, Luis?"

"Yeh," was the tight-lipped response.

"Okay! Bust the man who moves a finger. I'll get Quade over my shoulder."

He went to the back of the room, where Les was clawing at the wall and vainly trying to get to his feet. The beating he had received had reopened the gunshot wound on his cheek. Blood from it and his battered mouth smeared his face.

"Les, this is Bob," the tall man told him. "I'm going to take you out of here. Try to climb up my back. Come on!"

After some trying, he got the puncher over his shoulder. Making for the door with his unwieldy burden, he accidentally bumped into Hog. It swung the big fellow around and his foot shot out in an attempt to trip Bob. The latter avoided the trap and planted his boot in the man's belly with force enough to spill him on the floor. Hog went for his gun, only to have Bob kick it out of his hand.

"Steady, you birds!" Luis barked. "Keep your hands on the bar or I'll start stringing fish!"

There was pure murder in Hog Smith's piggy eyes as he glared up at Bob. "There'll be another time!" he snarled. "I'll square things up with you, you damned greaser!"

Bob's lips thinned and pulled away from his teeth. "You fat rat," he said without raising his voice, "you want to have your gun in your fist the next time you call me greaser. You'll need it."

With Johnnie helping, the two of them set Les in his saddle. Luis backed out of the El Paso then and they rode out of town without a shot being fired.

Chapter Six

Wash Priddy's Story

BOB and Luis said nothing about the affair in the El Paso. As for Les Quade, his mind was so foggy on that score that he didn't know exactly what happened. Evidence of the beating he had received was such, however, that the crew cornered Bob and dragged the facts out of him. The story was not long in reaching Matt Garner's ears. He sent for the Maxwells at once.

"You mean to tell me the two of you faced that gang and got Quade out of there without gunsmoke?"

"There was no great to-do about it," Bob said quietly. "The fireworks was limited to this little burn on my cheek."

Matt continued to shake his head. "Well, I'll be damned!" He brought his fist down on the table with a resounding bang. "It musta been somethin'! I'd have given an arm to see it!"

He had no sympathy for Quade. "He asked for what he got. Whisky's always been his poison. He'll be no good to me for two or three days. I was goin' to send him and Skip up to Three Springs in the mornin'. I'll have to send you boys up instead."

It raised a question in Bob's mind. From Three Springs Coulee it would be impossible for him to get into Wild Horse to keep his appointment with Pia. He told Matt why he wanted to go in. The old man nodded.

"I'll keep you up there only five days. That'll bring you down in good time." In his present mood, there was little Matt would have refused Bob.

The loneliness of Three Springs rested lightly on the Maxwells. They rode the coulee together and seemed to have it to themselves. Luis did the cooking, over an open fire in front of the cabin. It was pleasant to sit there in the evening and watch the vermillion-splashed peaks of the San Rafaels fade to mauve and then to a deeper purple as the long twilight came on, the air redolent with the fragrance of cedar.

They spoke often of Tom and their suspicions regarding Doc Morrell. Between times, Bob dreamed of Pia.

"We're putting all our eggs in one basket, thinking so much about Morrell," Luis observed one evening. "We may be all wrong about him. The sooner we find out, the better; we can start looking in some other direction."

"No question about it," Bob had to agree. "But I'm not giving up on him till I'm dead sure he isn't our man."

"We can find out who runs with him. That might give us a lead."

"It might," Bob conceded. "At least, it's worth looking into."

Luis smoked his cigarette in thoughtful silence. A thought occurred to him and he put it into words. "What about Childress? Do you suppose he's got hold of anything?"

"I doubt it, Luis. If he had, I believe Buck would have got word to us."

The old man rode up to the cabin the following morning. They hadn't expected to see him.

"I'm on my way home," Matt explained. "Spent the night with Big John, over at Currycomb. I been gittin' around some, the last couple days. Moffat gave me his word he'd sit down with Coulter and me and talk things over, when we got ready. Reb Taylor

agreed to think it over. That makes four of us. When I git two or three more lined up, we'll start somethin'. How are things goin' here?"

"Peaceful as you please," Bob told him. "We hadn't seen a soul till you showed up. The stuff looks good, Matt."

"Fine! Cows seem to do better up here than down below. I'll cut a big share of my beef herd outa this bunch, this fall."

He didn't stay long. "I'll send Les and Skip up, day after tomorrow!" he called back as he rode off.

That evening as they were eating supper, Luis called Bob's attention to a man on foot who stood sky-lined against the eastern rim of the coulee for a moment. A burro, with a heavy pack, followed.

"Some prospector, bound for the high places in the San Rafaels," Bob commented. "He must be an old-timer, judging by his gait."

They watched him as they ate. Twenty minutes passed before he was near enough to be hailed. He was a weathered individual, stoop-shouldered and lean as a rail. His eyes were bright, however, and there was a vigor about him that belied his years. He raised a hand in a return greeting.

"There's still some grub in the pot," Bob told him. "Will you sit down with us?"

"Don't mind if I do," the old man replied, looking them over the while. "Jinny and me have come a long piece since sunup. I'm Wash Priddy, by name. The two of yuh look like peas in a pod if I ever saw any. Reckon yo're brothers."

"Yeh." Bob acknowledged. "Bob and Luis Maxwell."

Their visitor nodded, and, to their surprise, said, "I figgered yuh might be. Childress said yuh wuz out in this country. I inquired at the house this afternoon. They told me I'd find yuh here."

It brought the brothers up short.

"How come Childress is spreading word about us?" Luis asked suspiciously.

Wash Priddy chuckled. "Don't worry about Buck doin' any loose talkin'. I had some information that he figgered yuh might like to know. Dish me up a plate of beans and I'll squat with yuh; I allus talk better when my innards has got sunthin' to chew on."

He gave his complete attention to his supper for a minute or two. Bob poured him a cup of coffee.

Wash wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Reckon yo're wonderin' what I got to tell yuh. Wal, I won't keep yuh waitin'. I got acquainted with yore brother Tom, when he came to Alamosa. I bin prospectin' in the La Paz Range for a couple years. Whenever I got together a little dust, I used to walk it into Alamosa and have him ship it into town fer me."

He looked into the coffeepot and found it empty.

"Throw a little water into her and let her bile," he told Luis. "Second bilin's almost as good as the fust— To git back to what I was sayin', I was on my way in to Alamosa when Tom wuz cut down. Fact is, I got thar that evenin', jest after Buck got out from town. Sam Getty wuz thar, and a couple of his men. I asked Sam if he'd take charge of my goods and he said no; the safe was busted. So I took the night stage into Las Animas. It wa'n't till three or four days later that I got talkin' to Buck and happened to mention I had seen some fellas at Drip Springs the night before Tom was

killed. I hadn't allowed as it wuz important, but I'm danged if he didn't take me up to the courthouse and have me sign a statement."

"Where is Drip Springs?" Bob demanded sharply, his patience sorely tried by Wash's garrulity.

" 'Bout seventeen mile nor'west of Alamosa. I got thar early in the evenin'. Knowin' it wuz the last water between me and Alamosa Crick, I figgered I'd spread my blanket, as I'd bin in the habit of doin'. But I had about sixteen ounces of dust on me, and I got a little skeery; figgered my goods might be a mite safer if I went back up the draw a piece after I'd cooked supper— That coffee's bilin'. Take her off!"

Bob lifted the pot from the fire. "The coffee can wait, Wash. Finish what you were saying."

"Wal, like I said, I moved up the draw, hobbled the burro, and bedded down in the chaparral. I hadn't bin thar too long when I see three fellas ridin' in from the west. I see right off they wuz headin' in to the springs. They passed right below me."

"Would you know them if you saw them again?"

"No, I wouldn't. The twilight wuz grayin' so fast I couldn't see who they wuz. But when they got down to the springs, I heard one of 'em say, 'We musta chased some gent outa here, Tex; the ashes of his fire is still warm.' "

"You're sure that's what he said— Tex?" Bob's voice was rough in its urgency.

"I'm dead shore! Buck says thar's no doubt but what they wuz the men who killed Tom and robbed the station. But good grief! Thar must be a thousand fellas named Tex! I told Buck so. I can't understand why he says it's important evidence."

"I agree with him that it is," Bob declared soberly. "I'd say it's the best lead we've got. You meet up with a lot of men named Tex, but there can't be too many of 'em in Wild Horse. You didn't hear anything else?"

"No, I stayed whar I wuz and laid low. I could see thar fire. They sat around smokin' for a time. When they turned in, I did the same. Jest before daybreak, I heerd 'em pullin' out. That would have put 'em on Alamosa Crick before noon."

"How much talking have you done about this?" Luis inquired.

"I ain't said nary a word to no one. Buck made me swear I wouldn't."

No one knew this Wild Horse country better than Wash Priddy. For forty years he had been tramping it, some of them lean years indeed. Though he was nearly eighty, he was still confident that he would strike it rich some day. With his pipe going and the companionship of a fire to loosen his tongue, he spoke of many things.

Bob and Luis steered the talk back to Drip Springs repeatedly, hoping he might give them some additional bit of information. Nothing came of it, however, and when the fire had burned to coals, Bob said, "You better put the burro on a pin and spend the night in the cabin with us."

"No; I'm obliged to yuh jest the same," said Wash. "If yuh got no objections, I'll roll up out here somewhars; I can't sleep with a roof over me. The stars is all I need."

After he had picketed his burro, the brothers said good night and turned in.

"Looks like we've got hold of something at last," Luis declared, as he pulled off his boots. "I suppose it would

be hoping for too much to find that one of the gents that tag along with Morrell answers to the name of Tex."

"Has it occurred to you that we've got a Tex on the 7-11 crew?"

"Tex Drury?" Luis laughed at the absurdity of it. "It wasn't Tex Drury!"

"I don't believe it was," Bob returned. "But we can't be sure even about him till we dig up some facts. That'll be easy enough in his case, but it'll be another story when it comes to some of the others. There may be only three or four men hanging out in Wild Horse who are called Tex; there may be a dozen. Pia's father ought to know. If he doesn't, he can get the information for us."

Early afternoon of the fifth day brought Les Quade and Skip to the cabin at Three Springs. Les still bore the marks of the beating he had received in the El Paso Bar. Painful as the effort was, he gave Bob a smile.

"I understand I bit off more'n I could chew—the other day in town," he said, as the two of them stood apart. "Red-eye and me don't mix. I'm obliged to you, Maxwell, but I can't figger why you bothered."

"I don't know, Les," Bob said, with a grin. "Maybe I figured you'd have done as much for me."

It was true, but Les couldn't bear to say so. "I dunno about that," he grumbled. "I'm a lone wolf; I play my own game. By the way, Maxwell, an old coot by the name of Wash Priddy stopped at the house the other afternoon and inquired if I knew where you was to be found. I sent him up here. Did he locate you?"

"Yeh, he showed up in the evening and spent the night with us." Bob offered no further explanation and Les did not ask for one.

Skip Lavelle, a shabby, bowlegged chewer of tobacco and in years of service the veteran of the 7-11 crew, was in the cabin when Bob walked in, ostensibly to have a last look around before leaving. His real purpose was to have a word with Skip.

"You know Matt's ways," Bob began, with shrewd indirection. "What do you figure he'd say if I struck him for a few days off?"

"I figger he'd turn yuh down. This is no time of the year to ask him. It's different in the spring. He gave Tex a week off to visit his folks down in Roswell, before the wagon went out for the calf brandin'. He's paid back the time by now."

"How do you mean?" Bob asked guilelessly.

"Why, he ain't been away from the spread since he got back from Roswell!"

That was all Bob wanted to know. It put Tex Drury in the clear.

Luis and he got away soon after. Bob related what he had learned from Skip.

"That's the end of that," said Luis. "I'm glad of it; I was sure Drury was all right. What's the rush? We'll make the house by five."

"I don't want to be any later than that," Bob called across to him. "I expected Les and Skip to show up by noon. If I'm going in to the fiesta, I want to be there in time."

A woman sat on the gallery with Matt, when they rode into the yard, which was surprising enough in itself to arouse their curiosity. She wore overalls and was booted and spurred.

"She's throwing the prod into the old man about something," Luis commented.

Bob grinned. "She's sure got him agreeing to whatever she's saying."

They pulled the saddles off their broncs and turned the animals into the horse corral. Turning back up the yard, they saw that Matt's visitor was leaving. He waved Bob over to the house.

"That was Mrs. Reb Taylor. She's got blood in her eye." Matt made a wry face. "I always figgered Annie wore the pants in that family. She wasn't waitin' for Reb to tell me what's on her mind; came herself."

Bob stood there wondering how it concerned him.

"The westbound stage was stuck up again last night. Annie was a passenger; she'd been in to Las Animas with her little girl, seein' a doctor. Nobody got hurt; the road agents got the box, and that's all there was to it. It may have been the same bunch that pulled the Alamosa job."

Bob's interest was keen enough by now. "How many of them were there, Matt?"

"Annie says three—all masked. She's fightin' mad. Wants to know what kinda spineless worms Reb and me and the rest of us are, lettin' things git so bad that a respectable woman can't take a sick child to town without runnin' into somethin' like that. By grab, she says if we don't quit twiddlin' our thumbs and git somethin' started, she's goin' to git the wimmen organized and take things into their own hands. I'm damned if I don't believe she's got spunk enough to do it!"

"That should grease the way for you," said Bob. Of far greater interest to him was the fact that three men had taken part in this latest depradation against the Getty and Wadell Express Company.

"That's the way I figger it," Matt continued. "I can shore count on Reb's outfit now. If Annie will only git Orv Pickett's wife fired up, he'll have to throw in with me, too."

Chapter Seven

Fiesta

THE religious rites in connection with the celebration of the feast day of Our Lady of the Angels had long been over when Bob Maxwell reached Wild Horse. Night was at hand, and as he rode past the church there were sounds of merriment from beyond the adobe wall that enclosed the ancient structure, the more modern school, and several smaller buildings. Beneath the carefully tended plum trees, brought from Mexico by Padre Donates's predecessors, gaily colored paper lanterns lent a gala air.

There was a time when the annual fiesta had been celebrated on the main street. But Wild Horse had changed, and in recent years the festivities had been confined to the church grounds, where they were safe from the intrusions and brawling of the lawless element.

Bob could have avoided the main street but he chose to ride its length deliberately. In passing the hotel, he saw Doc Morrell on the steps, in the company of several men, and knew Morrell had recognized him. He ignored them, giving the impression that they were of no consequence to him.

A surrey, drawn by a pair of mustang ponies, stood at the rack in front of Antonio Sandoval's shop. Its ele-

gance had long since departed, but it was still the pride of Gil Peralta's livery barn. It had once sported a fringed top, but that had been removed even before Gil bought the rig at auction, in Albuquerque.

Antonio popped out of the door as Bob pulled up. After greeting him, he said, "Put your horse in the yard, Roberto; I have rented the surrey; we will drive to the church."

He accompanied Bob into the yard. "Pia will be delighted that you were able to come."

"I'm sorry to be so late," said Bob. "Have I kept her waiting?"

Antonio shrugged. "Think nothing of it! She was ready some time ago, but now that you are here, she will keep you waiting thirty minutes while she finishes dressing." His tone changed abruptly. "Roberto—you had some trouble in town, the other day."

Bob nodded. "Does Pia know about it?" he asked, with a vague embarrassment.

"Naturally she knows! You couldn't have been gone an hour when she brought the news to me. One woman tells another—and such stories fly over town on wings."

"I'm not in the habit of engaging in a saloon row," said Bob. "I'm sorry if she is displeased with me—"

"Displeased?" the little saddlemaker exclaimed incredulously. "She wouldn't be my daughter if such an exhibition of courage displeased her! Her great concern, and mine, too, was that you might have been killed. Since you weren't, allow me to congratulate you. But now that Wild Horse has had its laugh at Hog Smith's expense, it leaves you a marked man. It's his boast that he'll settle his account with you. Being a coward, he won't come at you in a fair fight, if it can be avoided."

"I know," Bob muttered. "Hog Smith is the least of my worries. Luis and I were given a tip the other day that may lead us to the man who shot Tom. I've got to ask your help."

"Certainly!" Antonio exclaimed. "You know that the stage was stopped again last night?"

"I got the news just before I left the ranch."

"Three men again! Always three, Roberto! Mark my words, it is not just a coincidence!"

They entered the house by way of the shop, and as they were about to step into the living-quarters, the little man turned to Bob. "I'll tell her you have come," he said, with a puckish wink; "not that she doesn't know it, you may be sure." Tapping on Pia's door, he not only told her that Bob was there but informed her that it was already eight o'clock.

"You and Roberto will have to give me a few minutes," Pia called back. "I won't be long. I promise!"

"The play will have begun by the time we get there," Antonio complained, as he sat down with Bob. "It is *Los Comanches* again this year. The horses play their parts better than the actors. Perhaps that is why I always enjoy it." Pulling his chair closer, he said in a lowered voice, "How am I to help you?"

Bob related what Wash Priddy had told Luis and him. He spoke freely, expressing his deep conviction that at last they had a clue of priceless value.

"It would be difficult to overestimate its importance," the little man declared, with sober consideration. "I repeat what I told you when I saw you last: Fit the job to the man. If his name is Tex, or he associates with one

of that name, you can be sure you are getting close."

"That's how I see it," said Bob. "You know Doc Morrell. I understand he has a few followers. Is there a Tex among them?"

"I can't say," Antonio answered, frankly perplexed. "I didn't know he had any followers. There is some connection between Cap Null, the proprietor of the hotel, and Morrell. I've heard that Cap loans him money when he is broke. I can't say anything in Cap Null's favor, but he is far too shrewd to follow Doc Morrell's lead in any lawless enterprise. Who gave you this information about Doc?"

"A man on the 7-11 crew."

"It may be true, Roberto. I shall look into it. If he has some thug working with him by the name of Tex, I will let you know, the next time you come in."

"I would like to have you make a list of every Tex in Wild Horse," said Bob. "Could you manage it?"

"It will have to be done discreetly, otherwise suspicion will be aroused. It will take a few days."

Bob got to his feet quickly as Pia joined them.

"At last!" she exclaimed, her dark eyes flashing. In her high-heeled slippers, she pirouetted for his examination. "Was the waiting worth while, Roberto?"

"You are very lovely tonight, Pia," he said simply.

She offered him her hand and he raised it to his lips. In her formal dress with black lace mantilla, tall tortoiseshell comb, and finely embroidered Chinese shawl, he found her ravishingly beautiful.

Her father, anxious to be off, cleared his throat impatiently. "It is a quarter past eight by the clock! Sixto was right; he preferred being there on time to riding in the surrey! Come!"

Without further ado, he snuffed out the candles and hurried them to the carriage. Bob assisted Pia and took his place beside her on the rear seat. Her father had already taken up the reins. Turning the team, he cracked the whip, and they sped up the street. Pia laughed mischievously.

"He is distressing himself needlessly," she whispered. "No one gives so much to the church. Padre Donates wouldn't permit the play to begin until father arrives."

Wild Horse had no street lights but the glow from shop and saloon windows illumined the main thoroughfare. Loungers at the hotel and in front of the bars turned their heads to gaze at the Sandovals and Bob, as they drove past. Morrell was still on the hotel steps. His eyes were not the only ones that smoldered with lust at sight of Pia.

As Pia had predicted, the drama of *Los Comanches* had been delayed, awaiting their arrival. As soon as they found seats on a bench under the plum trees, a signal was given and the mounted actors took their places.

Los Comanches was one of the oldest of New Mexican folk dramas. There were three or four versions of it. Bob was familiar with all of them. The one tonight told the story of an Indian battle of 1774, in which Cuerno Verde, the Comanche chief, was defeated. It was all swordplay, done on horseback.

Between young and old, several hundred were in the audience. They applauded noisily, when the drama was over, and as in any gathering of Spanish-speaking people, the air was soon filled with gay laughter and the chat-

tering of happy voices. To the strumming of guitars and the melodious notes of an accordion, there was impromptu singing—old songs that everyone knew.

A wooden platform had been laid on the ground for the dancing, so small that only a few could dance at a time. That was to come later, after the foot races and games for the children were over. Appetizing odors came from one end of the yard, where a number of booths had been erected. There, tamales, frijoles, and other delectables could be purchased, as well as syrupy drinks of every color of the rainbow.

As Bob feared, Pia was quickly surrounded by a group of admirers. Having made but slight progress with her, they good-naturedly accepted him as still another obstacle in their path.

A friend got Sandoval's attention. "Here is Padre Donates, Antonio. He is looking for you."

The aged Franciscan's coming dispersed the group that had been paying court to Pia. She surmised that Padre Donates had Bob on his mind, rather than her father. Bob had the same idea, for he was not unfamiliar with the ways of small-town and country parishes. Unknown to the two of them, Antonio and the holy man had already discussed him at some length, with the latter reserving the right to decide whether or not this newcomer was of sufficient character to be entrusted with one of the fairest flowers in his flock.

After the usual pleasantries had been disposed of, the expected questions followed. The pulse in Pia's cheek beat faster as she saw Padre Donates nod approval repeatedly.

"You go to confession and take communion, my son?" he inquired.

"Not as often as I should, Father. Working on the range, I—"

"I know," the good man finished for him, with a chuckle. "It is so far. But I observe that the miles are never too many, when there is a beautiful young woman waiting at the end of them! You are welcome here, Roberto. Come whenever you can."

Exercises by the little girls of the school, supervised by the nuns, had been concluded. Games for the boys followed. Then the music struck up again, a lively air that made one want to click his heels, and there was a general movement to the dancing-platform.

There had been a time when Bob thought nothing of riding forty miles to a *baile*, and had been proud of the figure he cut. Of late, however, he had had little occasion to indulge in such pleasures. Rusty as he was, he knew the steps of the formal dances and the routine of the rollicking *baile de figuras*. With Pia for his partner, he quickly found himself and danced with such grace and spirit that she could not refrain from complimenting him.

Whenever a dance ended, there was always some admirer ready to claim her. Regretfully Bob relinquished her to one after another, but always she came back to him.

Midnight came all too soon. With sleepy Sixto on the front seat with his father, the four of them drove home. Bob had enjoyed the evening so thoroughly that he had completely forgotten his cares for a few hours. They caught up with him as the surrey rolled past the El Paso Bar.

"I shudder whenever I think of that place," Pia said, for his ears alone. "You were so brave, Roberto! But promise me you won't tempt fate that

way again."

Bob looked down at her, his eyes sober. "You wouldn't want me to walk wide of that crowd, would you?"

"No," she murmured. "All I ask is that you be careful."

Bob placed his hand on hers and was silent for a moment or two. "I aim to see this thing through, Pia. I don't mean only with Hog Smith and his crowd. It wasn't by chance that Luis and I rode into this Wild Horse country and went to work for Matt Garner for thirty a month and cakes."

"Did you expect to surprise me—saying that?" Her lips parted in a secret, troubled smile. "I surmised from the first that you had a purpose in being here. Someone has wronged you, Roberto. You hope to find him in Wild Horse—is that it?"

"I'd prefer that you didn't know, Pia. But you mean so much to me that I shall tell you if you insist."

"No," she replied, "I want you to keep your secret. Tell me only this—are you in greater danger than I have reason to believe?"

"If so, I am not aware of it," he said reassuringly. "Please do not be afraid for me." His fingers closed over her hand and she did not draw it away.

"How simple you make it sound—knowing it is impossible," she whispered. "You take my heart with you, yet you tell me not to worry. May the Holy Mother hear my prayers for you!"

The surrey drew up in front of the shop.

"Gil will come for it," said Antonio. "I will leave it here. Before you go, Roberto, you and I will have a cup of wine to speed you on your way."

He carried Sixto into the house, and Pia and Bob followed. While she was putting the boy to bed, Antonio stepped into the shop and returned with the neckerchief ring he had made for Luis. He exhibited it proudly.

"It is a beautiful piece of turquoise," he declared, saying nothing about the mounting he had made.

"Luis will be pleased," Bob told him. "It is the finest neckerchief ring I have ever seen. Let me pay you for it."

The little man waved the suggestion aside. "Say nothing of payment! It is only a favor to a friend."

He took a decanter of madeira from a cupboard as Pia rejoined them, and filled two goblets. He did not pour one for her. It was not the custom for young unmarried women to drink wine with a guest.

"A toast to you, Roberto," said Antonio. "May you live long and prosper and have many children to comfort you in your old age!"

Bob glanced at Pia as he raised his cup. She lowered her eyes modestly and smiled.

Chapter Eight

Running Fight

FOR two days the Maxwells, Tex Drury, and Les Quade worked the high meadows to the east of the 7-11 house, rounding up horses that had been running wild on the range since shortly after the spring roundup.

It was hard work, and tempers wore thin as the remuda was gradually pushed down to the corrals, where the rough spots would be worked off the animals in plenty of time for the beef roundup, still weeks away. These ponies, strong and fresh, were to be

used in the cutting out and afterward on the long drive to Las Animas.

When the work was done, 7-11 had over fifty head in the big pole corral at the upper end of the yard. Matt came out to look them over.

"They summered fine!" he declared critically. "We can begin polishin' 'em up tomorrow." His good humor vanished suddenly. "Say! I don't see that big red hoss, with the white stockin's that I rode a bit this spring." He looked straight at Les. "What did you do—miss him?"

"We didn't see nuthin' of him at all," Les retorted. "I looked for him special. Reckon some gent dropped his loop on that hoss."

"Goddlemighty help him if I catch up with him!" Matt whipped out angrily. "That hoss took my eye! He was up the other side of Teapot Rocks a couple weeks ago. I saw him!"

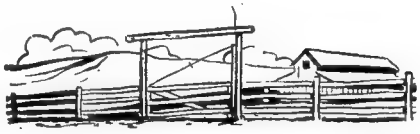
The old man stomped and raged. After starting for the house, he turned back. "Les, you go back up beyond the rocks tomorrow and have another look. You understand?"

"Carryin' on like that about a range bronc!" Les complained, after Matt had gone. "I won't find that red hoss up there; he wouldn't have wandered off by hisself. The stuff stays purty well bunched."

"Reckon you'll put a shine on your pants for nothin'," Tex Drury declared, siding with Les. "Matt oughta figger he got off light; he knows there's someone driftin' through the hills every few days."

"Luis and I whipped out that mountain meadow above Teapot Rocks," said Bob. "We didn't find a thing. That's mountain-lion country. Maybe that's the way your red horse went."

"No," Les demurred. "Them big cats



don't eat bones. If they'd pulled down a bronc, they wouldn't have stopped with one. We'd seen some sign of what they left."

Bob let it go at that. Les pulled out in the morning. It was late at night when he returned, empty-handed. The rough string was being worked already. By the end of the week the wildness had been rubbed out of them, all save one, a nervous-eyed zebra dun. Les insisted the horse had gone bad and would always be an outlaw. The dun had traded ends while in the air with him and pitched him against the water trough. It had hurt his shoulder some but it was nothing compared to the injury to his feelings.

"That critter has never been no use to me," Matt said that evening, at supper.

"It ain't so much that the dun is mean as that he's jittery," Luis spoke up. "Help me to get a saddle on him in the morning and I'll lead him down to the calf pasture. If you'll leave us alone there, I'll gentle him."

Les reared up angrily. "Like hell you will! What you aimin' to do—show me up?"

"No, I'm just offering to gentle the dun, Les, not you."

The men howled. With the laugh put on him, Les stomped out, growling to himself.

Luis began working with the dun. After several days, he had no trouble with it. He turned it into the corral with the other horses one morning. With Matt and most of the crew watching, he put the dun through its paces.

Riding up to the old man, who sat astraddle of the corral gate, he said:

"All this fellow needed was to get a little confidence in himself. If it's all right with you, I'll keep him in my string."

"Fair enough," said Matt, frankly impressed. "I wouldn't have believed you could 'a' done it. Shows there's somethin' to handlin' hosses besides clubbin' 'em."

He was still talking, when Reb Taylor pounded into the yard on his buckskin pony. He saw Matt at the corral and roared down the yard at a gallop.

Matt slid down off the gate apprehensively. "Wal, don't sit there gaspin' for breath!" he jerked out. "What is it?"

"Matt, there's a bunch of men—six in all—camped out about two miles above Teapot Rocks. One of my men—Rip Forrester—was over to Datil. He came through the mountains, getting back to the ranch. He had a good look at them. He says they've got a bronc up there wearing your brand."

"A red hoss, with white stockin's?"

Taylor nodded. "That's what Rip says."

"Did he recognize 'em?"

"Yeh! Hog Smith and his bunch! You know what they're waiting around for. They're going to get into you or me. When Annie heard what Rip said, she hit the ceiling. I tell you, life ain't been worth living with that woman since she got caught in that stage holdup last week. She says if what you said to her wasn't just so much wind, you'll throw in with me and we'll go after Hog Smith and give him what he's been asking for."

"How many men can you spare, Reb?"

"Seven—counting myself."

"Good! I can do a little better. You git back to the ranch. Arm yore men and head into the hills. Go up by way of the broken butte. You'll hit Little Camas Valley. That'll take you up east of Teapot Rocks. We'll go up through Slate Canyon and over the rim, a couple miles west of the Rocks. You oughta be up there by the middle of the afternoon. We'll catch those birds in between us, and settle their hash for keeps!"

Reb turned his pony and raced away as swiftly as he had come. Matt Garner looked at Bob. "Give us a little luck and this will be it!" he said soberly. "I'll leave Skip and Curly here; the rest of us will hit the leather. You pass the word. Be ready to ride as quick as you can; I'll set out some rifles and ca'tridges. You got hulls loaded with buck for that shotgun?"

"A dozen or so," said Bob.

Matt nodded. "Pack it along."

Fifteen minutes later, they rode out of the yard, ten strong, and swept across the bench. Half an hour's riding brought them to the mouth of Slate Canyon. To make speed, they strung out in single file, with Matt leading the way.

Presently the trail began to pitch steeply. What little talk there had been dropped to a muttered word or two. When Matt threw up a hand and they stopped to blow the horses, the men sat silent, their faces dark with their thinking. The old man broke the tension.

"I don't want a shot fired till I know for certain that Reb and his boys is in position to turn them rats back if they try to bust over east into Little Camas. That understood?"

The crew signified that it did with a muttered response.

"Jest as soon as Hog sees that the fat's in the fire, he and his friends will run. That'll be all right if we can drive 'em down to the bench. We can hand our respects to 'em if we git 'em in open country."

They went on. It was not yet three o'clock when they rode out on Aguila Rim. They probed along it, an occasional stunted piñon the only cover. They were well above the rustler camp and somewhat to the west of it. Matt called them around him, after they had proceeded for another mile.

"This would be the place to quit the rim," he said. "You boys hold up here for half an hour or so; I'm goin' to make a little scout to the east and see if Taylor has showed up."

He moved away, riding carefully. The better part of an hour passed before they saw him returning.

"Reckon we're all set," he announced. "Reb and his boys are movin' up Little Camas now."

They picked their way down off the rim into broken country of granite dikes and crumbling red-sandstone cliffs, wind-eroded into fantastic shapes. On Matt's orders, they spread out.

"Take it easy!" he warned. "We want to surprise 'em if we can!"

They moved forward in a loose quarter circle, with Bob and Luis on its eastern tip. On their right, a long, ragged ridge frowned down on them. They had to take it for granted that Taylor and his crew were on that ridge, keeping pace with them and cutting off escape in that direction.

Luis got Bob's attention a few minutes later and pointed out a rider who stood sky-lined on the ridge. Bob passed the word along to Matt.

"Reb!" the old man commented tersely. And then, with sudden anxiety: "He ain't showin' himself and wavin' his hat that way for nuthin'! He's tryin' to tell us somethin'!"

It was no less than that they were almost on top of their quarry.

Les Quade was the first to spot the camp. Sight of Hog Smith knocked all reason out of him. Swept by his implacable hatred of the man, he whipped up his rifle and slapped a shot at him.

At two hundred yards, he shouldn't have missed. But he did, and the others were in time to see Hog and his bunch sail into the saddle and break away recklessly for the meadows around Teapot Rocks.

"The damned fool!" Matt roared. "Why in hell did he do that?"

Seeing what had happened, Reb and his punchers came down from the ridge and joined in the fight. It was a stern chase as far as Teapot Rocks. There, the rustlers split up, each going his own way as the best guarantee that at least some of them would make it.

Hog Smith dashed into a rocky defile. Bob saw Luis and Tex Drury take after him. He had been in there himself during the horse roundup and knew the defile opened into a long shallow canyon that ran all the way down to the lower hills.

They'll never overhaul him, he thought, as he scratched his bronc and tried to close in on one of Hog's gang. He chased him over a mile, only to have one of Taylor's men knock the rustler out of the saddle.

Taylor and half a dozen others came up. He glanced at the fallen man. "Ain't no use trying to move him," he said woodenly. "We got two; he'll make three."

Les Quade saw them and swung

their way. He was leading the red horse with the white stockings. "I got me one!" he whipped out savagely. "That little Whitey Ripple! Who've you got there? Oh, Tex Alford! Another fine rat! How many did we git altogether, Reb?"

"If you got one, that makes four we're sure of. There may be more. We'd have got them all if you hadn't lost your head. I wouldn't stand for that sort of nonsense if you was riding for me."

Les stiffened. "I'll catch enough hell from the old man; it don't call for no put-in from you!"

Bob got his attention. "This Tex Alford—who is he?"

"Jest a renegade Mormon, from up Vernal way. His honest name was Moroni Alford. For a kid, he was gittin' purty tough by the time he hit Wild Horse, a couple years ago, and threw in with Hog Smith."

"You allus said it was Alford that put the slug in your arm the night we jumped a bunch of 'em, out on the flats," Shorty McCandless, a 7-11 man, recalled.

"It was him! That's squared, by God! I thought I was goin' to lose Ripple, there for a couple minutes; he had a lot of horse under him. This big red bronc that Matt raised so much hell about shore can move!"

Further questioning convinced Bob that Tex Alford was not the Tex for whom he was looking.

Someone said, "Here comes Matt and Drury."

Drury had a rag wound around his right hand and it was blood-soaked. Bob's mouth went hard, not seeing Luis with them. He looked at Garner. He thought the old man got down heavily and that his round face was sober in a way he had never seen. The red horse stood there. Matt barely glanced at it.

"What is it?" Bob demanded sharply, as Matt opened his mouth and no words came from his lips. "Is it Luis?"

The old man swallowed hard. "You got to brace yoreself for this, Bob. I—I don't like to tell you— They got him."

It was suddenly still. The blood drained out of Bob's face and he rocked as though he had been struck on the jaw. "Who got him?" he asked behind his clenched teeth.

"Hog Smith. Tex and Luis chased Hog into that long canyon that runs all the way down to the bench. They figgered he was goin' all the way. When they swung around the second bend, he was waitin' for 'em."

"We was right on top of him before we saw him," Drury explained. "He dropped Luis with the first shot. I tried to get into the wall. A slug from his gun bounced off the rocks and smashed my hand. When he saw my gun go flyin', he lit out in a hurry. He knew I couldn't go after him."

Tom gone—and now Luis! The sympathy of Matt and the others went out to him, and it was no less moving because it was wordless. Les Quade jerked at his hat and cursed himself.

"Reckon you can blame me for this!" he ground out fiercely. "If I hadn't been so itchy-fingered, we'd have got 'em all and this wouldn't have happened. I swear to God, I'll go into Wild Horse and git him for you!"

"No, that'll be up to me," Bob said tightly. "I'll attend to it."

"There's no need to handle it that way," Reb spoke up. "We'll all go into Wild Horse and dig that rat out of the woodpile."

"Right!" Matt cried. "To make shore

we're strong enough to have our way about it, we'll go in by Diamond and a Half and pick up help there."

Bob shook his head. "I'm obliged to all of you—feeling that way about it. But this is my job. I want to take Luis into Las Animas and place him beside his mother and other brother. When that's been done, I'll take care of Hog Smith."

The old man and Taylor tried to persuade him to change his mind. Seeing it couldn't be done, Matt said, "I'll drive into town and get the undertaker out to the ranch, and take care of the other details. That's the least I can do. You go down with Reb and me now; the boys will bring Luis in."

Bob nodded bleakly. "If you would, Matt. I'd appreciate it."

He was a grim, lonely figure as he followed Taylor and the old man down through the hills. *I never should have pulled him away from Blue Mesa; I should have come out here alone*, he brooded self-accusingly. *Not yet thirty—and to be snuffed out by a skunk like Hog Smith!*

He knew no way to express the grief that was in him; the world had fallen apart and he was too stunned even to try to pick up the pieces.

At the house, Matt ordered a team hitched to his buckboard at once.

"I'll git started right away," he said. And to Reb: "You'll stay till the boys bring Luis down?"

"Of course," Taylor told him.

When the old man was ready to leave, he called Bob out to the rig. "I ain't of your religion—got no religion at all, as a fact. Would you want the padre to come out?"

"That won't be necessary," said Bob. "Those things can be attended to in Las Animas. There is something I'd like to have you do. I wish you'd see Pia and her father and tell them what's happened before they hear it from someone else."

"I'll be glad to." Matt's voice was gruff against his unexpressed emotion. "They may want to see you."

"No, don't let them talk you into that. I know they'll feel for me, but I don't want any tears."

The old man nodded approvingly. "Reckon yo're right. I'll have the undertaker out here before midnight. When he gits done, he can start for Las Animas."

Les and Skip sat up with Bob. The moon got up late. As it hung on the horizon, its mellow light peeked under the covered gallery and touched their sober faces. Les settled lower in his chair, his hard-bitten countenance rockier than ever. He suddenly tossed away his cigarette and sat up stiffly.

"Maxwell, why don't you tell me I'm a no-account hound?" he demanded, his voice harsh and rasping. "Hog swore he'd git Luis and you. You got in wrong with him on my account. This afternoon, I make a damned-fool play, or he'd never got a chance to use a gun on Luis. If I—"

"You don't have to blame yourself for anything," Bob told him.

"That's easy for you to say!" Les snarled. "I never gave a damn about no man till you came along. You kinda got to me, somehow. I figgered if ever there was any need of it, I'd come through for you." He laughed caustically. "I took a damn fine way of showin' it, didn't I?"

Bob got up and put an arm on Les's shoulder. "I tell you to forget it. Honey's made some coffee for us. Let's go in and sit down."

Les looked up incredulously. "You mean it, Maxwell—you don't hold nothin' against me?"

Touched, Bob said in a choked voice, "Not a thing, Les. This isn't the end of the trail. We've still got a long way to go."

Chapter Nine

Cap Null Talks Turkey

THE evening train from the north arrived in Las Animas at a quarter to six, when it was on time. Las Animas was the end of the run, and the train lay there over night and was never turned for the return trip until morning.

That fact, along with many others, had been carefully noted by certain interested parties. The depot was a long half mile from the downtown business section. The hotel bus and several ancient vehicles were always on hand to convey passengers who wanted to ride; others walked. They invariably departed before whatever express there was had been transferred from the combination baggage and express car to the waiting Wells, Fargo wagon. It was the manner in which the steel express box was handled that particularly interested the three men who had been watching the depot for three days.

The steel box and other packages were placed on a hand truck and wheeled to the wagon. Unguarded, the box lay there for three or four minutes, while Hank Bushnell, the messenger went into the depot.

Hank's carelessness caught up with him this evening, for as he disappeared inside the depot, the men waiting behind the coal sheds, a few yards away, adjusted handkerchiefs over their faces, and dashed up to the wagon. One leaped to the seat, grabbed the reins, and lashed the team into a gallop as one of his companions caught his horse. In a matter of seconds, they were racing away with their prize, guns waving.

In a twinkling, Bushnell realized what had happened. Whatever his faults, there was nothing wrong with his nerve or shooting eye. Snatching up the agent's rifle, he rushed outside and got the driver in his sights. His third shot found its mark; the bandit crumpled over, and between the shooting and the dragging reins, the team bolted in a mad runaway.

The careening wagon hit a boulder and, bouncing into the air, turned over. The horses broke free and dashed away. The upness of the jig was apparent to the two remaining bandits. Flattened out on their broncs, they cut down into the Rio Grande bottoms and got across the river.

There was no pursuit; the attempted robbery and its aftermath had come too quickly. Buck Childress was in Santa Fe, turning a prisoner over to the warden at the penitentiary. In his absence, the best the town marshal could do was to wire Buck, demanding that he return at once.

News of what had happened swept over Las Animas like the proverbial prairie fire. Bob was one of the last to hear it. He had been in Las Animas for three days on his somber errand, and had planned to leave for the ranch the following morning. The fact that three men had been involved in the attempted robbery was enough to make him change his mind at once. He

was acquainted with Hank Bushnell. Hank was unable to give him a description of the two bandits who had escaped.

Later that evening, Bob went to the undertaker's and had a look at the slain man. He came away convinced that he had seen him in Wild Horse.

Childress reached Las Animas in the morning. It was noon before he found time to sit down in his office with Bob. "I leave town for twenty-four hours and somethin' like this is pulled on me!" he complained bitterly. "If those birds hadn't been greenhorns, they'd have got away with the job. They could have jumped Hank after he left the depot and made him drive down into the bottoms. There'd have been nothin' to it. I just ran into Bud Galloway, the editor of the *Star*. He says he's goin' to blow the lid off things in the paper this afternoon."

"What's his slant?" Bob asked.

"That you can't let things continue as they are around Wild Horse and not expect to have more of what happened last evenin'. He's right, of course. If he lights into the commissioners hard enough, he may git somethin' stirred up. I hope he does."

"You don't sound very optimistic," Bob observed.

"I'm not. The only way to make money available for county-wide law enforcement is to raise the tax levy. When that's pointed out, the hue and cry that's bein' heard now will fade to a whisper— Have you taken care of Luis's affairs?"

Bob nodded soberly. "Everything. Vic Gartiez is going to cut a nice stone for him. It'll be ready when I get back for the steer shipping. I was going to pull out for the ranch this morning until this thing came up last evening."

"I'm glad you stayed over," said Buck. "Have you seen the *hombre* Hank cut down?"

"Yeh, I had a look at him last night. I don't know who he is, Buck, but I'll swear I've seen him in Wild Horse. Have you been able to get a line on him?"

"No, I ain't. Jesse Pike's in town. Suppose we go down the street and find him. Jesse might recognize this fella; he's been in Wild Horse for years."

They found Pike in Sol Mossman's store. He had already seen the dead bandit.

"Did you recognize him, by any chance?" Buck inquired.

"Knew him right off," said Jesse. "Billy Dexter. He never cut any ice around Wild Horse."

"Who did he travel with?" the sheriff asked.

Jesse ran his fingers through his beard. "As I recall," he said thoughtfully, "he did his drinking and carousing with three or four men."

"Was Doc Morrell one of them?" Bob questioned.

"Yeh," said Jesse. "If I was to name one man in partic'lar, I'd say Morrell."

Buck nodded. "That may be some help to me, Jesse," he said casually.

Bob and the sheriff found themselves on the street a few moments later.

"There you are!" said Buck. "Seems like you got the right hunch on Morrell. I'll go you one better. I haven't any evidence to back it up, but it's my opinion he was in on all these stage holdups and the Alamosa raid, as well as this deal last night."

"That's my idea," said Bob. "I think the same three men pulled every one of them. I don't know who the third

one is, but if he's anything like this fellow Dexter, then there's no question but what Morrell was head man."

They returned to the sheriff's office. From his desk, Buck produced a drawing of his own that was a replica of the picture Tom Maxwell had left in the dust at Alamosa.

"I was goin' to show you this the other day," he said, "but you were so broken up over Luis that I decided I wouldn't. I made this copy weeks ago. I don't know how many times I've sat here tryin' to find somethin' in it that we mighta missed. I drew this from memory, of course. Would you say I got it about right?"

"No question about it," Bob told him. "Luis and I spoke about it so often that I can close my eyes and see it. If Tom had only told us a little bit more!"

"Bob, that's what I used to say. Thinkin' about it so much has convinced me that he told us all he could tell us—that the gent who got him wore his gun on the left hip and made the across-the-body draw. He wasn't no southpaw, or Tom wouldn't have bothered drawin' this arrow; he'd scrawled the word lefty—or just the letter L. That would have been enough."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," Bob said, after a moment. "It makes sense."

"It makes a lot of sense. Doc Morrell is a right-hander, but he packs his gun on his left hip. Tony ought to have some information for you when you git back. I'd sure like to know what he has to say."

"I'll pass it on to you," Bob offered. He reached for his hat. "I better be moving along; I've just got time to grab a bite and catch the afternoon stage for the west. You won't be out that way, Buck?"

"I can't say. Depends on what comes out of this trouble last night. Wells, Fargo won't let it go unnoticed."

"If I don't see you sooner, I'll be in when 7-11 hits town," Bob said from the doorway. "So long for now!"

Buck came out from behind his desk and laid a hand on Bob's arm. "I know what you been through of late. I can see yore nerves are as tight as fiddle strings. Don't rush into anythin'; wait till you're free and loose. That always gives a man a little edge."

Bob nodded. "I'll do that. I may need that little edge."

Little Dick had paid his last visit to Wild Horse. Never again would he sit on the Barrett House porch or spend an idle hour in the shop of Antonio Sandoval.

All unaware that his coming had been anticipated, he had led his long riders into Pawnee, Kansas, one hot August noon. As was their custom, they deployed in front of the bank. The little man and his lieutenant marched inside, whipping out their guns as they went through the door. It was as far as they got. From the flat roofs of the buildings opposite, a withering blast of rifle fire struck the bandits. Inside the bank, the town marshal and four others went into action.

The decision was never in doubt. When the smoke cleared, Little Dick and three of his men lay dead within a few feet of the bank door, the clothes literally shot off them. Two others managed to reach the horses and shoot their way out of Pawnee. Both were so seriously wounded that they didn't get far before they were captured.

Little Dick and his gang wiped out, the headlines blazed across Kansas.

Bankers and the railroad companies breathed easier.

The news was not long in reaching Wild Horse. Among the lawless, it had a profound effect, and though a few pretended to take it lightly and brush it aside as of no consequence, they fooled no one. In the saloons along the main street, and up and down Rawhide Gulch, men spoke of nothing else. In Queenie Anderson's dive, Blind Joe sat at his piano and sang softly:

"Let sixteen gamblers come handle my coffin,
Let sixteen cowboys come sing me a song,
Take me to boot-hill and throw the sod o'er me,
I'm just a poor cowboy and I know I done wrong."

Little Dick was still occupying the center of the stage when word came of the fiasco at the depot in Las Animas, and as a result it received scant attention. Cap Null, the proprietor of the Barrett House, refused to let it go unnoticed, however, for he saw certain dire repercussions stemming from it. He sent for Doc Morrell.

Morrell was out at the Whisky Ranch when a man brought word that Cap wanted to see him. He took his time about going in; ideas were running through his head that made him resent being sent for in such arrogant fashion. He knew that Butch Cassidy and two of his cronies had left the States for Argentina. Little Dick was gone. Hog Smith was still making himself scarce, waiting for things to cool off. It seemed an appropriate time for a new man to take charge. Doc fancied himself in that role.

Being kept waiting did not improve Cap's temper. He had his private quarters in two rooms on the second floor of the hotel. When Doc walked in, he greeted him with a rocky face.

"The next time I send for you, you want to be Johnny on the spot!" he whipped out angrily.

Doc slid into a chair and lit a cigarette. "I didn't know it was important. What's got you burnt up?"

"If you don't know, I'll tell you!" Cap rifled back. "It's that job in Las Animas. Why in hell did you have to pull anythin' like that?"

Morrell would have denied any connection with it, but Cap cut him off short.

"Don't come that on me! I know what goes around here; Billy Dexter and Ike Legrand have been travelin' with you for months. When I don't see the three of you for a week, I can figger out the rest. You was over your head in the first place, goin' after Wells, Fargo. I ain't surprised that you lost your nerve and left a dead man behind to be identified."

Morrell jerked out of his chair. "Dammit, Cap, I don't have to take that kinda talk from you just because you staked me a couple times when I was broke. What happened in Las Animas didn't rub no skin off your chin."

"No?" Cap slammed his cigar on the floor. "I'm doin' all right here; nobody's bothering me. You think I want some damned fool upsettin' my applecart? Look at this paper! Yammerin' for a cleanup! Raise money; order the sheriff to swear in an army of deputies, it says! Round up every crook and blackleg in Mescalero County!" Cap glared Doc to silence when the latter would have interrupted. "If I have to close up, it'll rub plenty of skin off my chin!"

"Cap–they've talked that way before. You know nothin' will come of it."

"Don't be too sure!" Cap raged. "You saw Taylor and Matt Garner throw in together to hand Hog's gang the works. They never did that before. If you kept your ears open, you'd know that Garner is bustin' his belt to get all these stockmen organized. With Butch gone, and now Little Dick, things can change around here in a hurry."

Doc nodded. "I been thinkin' about that. With your backin', why couldn't I step in?"

"You?" Cap snorted derisively. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard!" He fastened his terrible eyes on Morrell. "Doc–get this straight; you ain't big enough for nothin' like that. If you make a move in that direction you won't last forty-eight hours! I got just one thing to say to you. Don't pull another job like that Las Animas business. If you do, your number is up. Now get outa here and keep your mouth shut!"

Chapter Ten

A Hundred Eyes Watch Death

WIPING out the Hog Smith gang did not stop the rustling. Bob had been back at the ranch only a day when Johnnie Landers rode over from Currycomb with a message from Big John Moffat; upward of forty head of prime Currycomb steers had gone the way of so many others.

"That don't surprise me," Matt declared. "I didn't figger for a minit that our trouble was at an end. How did they go? Through Apache Pass?"

"No," said Johnnie. "We've had a couple men layin' out up there for a week. A day or two ago, Orv Pickett sent a couple of his boys up to join 'em. These gents last night musta got wind of what they'd run into at the pass; they headed north. You know the old mines in Copper Canyon?"

"Yeh–"

"Wal, that's the way they went. The boss wants to know when you're goin' to call that meetin'."

"He does, eh?" Matt found reason to be amused. "Big John's changed his tune a bit! You tell him I'm waitin' to hear from Orv Pickett and a couple others. He's got more drag with Pickett than I have. Mebbe he can persuade him to bury the hatchet and throw in with us."

"Big John saw Pickett this mornin'."

"He did? What came of it?"

"Pickett says he wants to wait till he has his beef shipped before he does anythin'. That seems to be what Morgan and Redman think, too."

"The dang fools!" Matt snorted disgustedly. "They'll be away; the best they can do will be to leave a few men at home. It'll be a rustlers' picnic same as it was last year! But there's no sense goin' ahead till we can all throw in together. You tell Big John that's my answer."

During the afternoon Les Quade shuffled into Matt's office. He lost no time stating his business.

"Matt, it's Bob's turn to go up the coulee tomorrow. If it's just the same to you, I wish you'd send me up in his place. Him and Luis was up there together last time; he'll see him wherever he turns."

The old man swallowed his surprise before he looked up.

"Les, I got no intention of sendin' him up to Three Springs. He wants to go to town. Knowin' what's on his mind, I don't figger I can say no."

"Hog Smith?" Les queried.

Matt nodded. "I don't know that he's showed up yet. But the sooner that matter is settled, the better. I want you to go in with Bob. You needn't let him git the idea that yo're taggin' along to keep an eye on him. Honey needs some things for the kitchen. You can drop into Jesse Pike's and take care of it; I'll send a wagon in to pick up the stuff. That'll give you an excuse."

"Okay!" Les muttered, his eyes lighting up eagerly.

At supper, Matt issued his orders for the next day. Les pretended that he was receiving his instructions for the first time. Bob said nothing, but he was not fooled by the old man's subterfuge.

Next morning, Stony Williams, the cook's swamper, left early, with the wagon. Bob and Les followed him an hour later. As they jogged out of the yard, Bob said, "Who's idea was this—having you side me into town?"

Les looked down his nose and said innocently, "I ain't runnin' this spread; you heard Matt give me my orders."

"I did," Bob acknowledged. And then, with a straight face: "He's slipping a little; sending two men in to do the work of one."

"If you don't like it, talk to him," Les flared up, thinking that was the best escape. "I won't git in your way; you tend to your business and I'll tend to mine."

Bob smiled for the first time in days. "Reckon the two of us will make out."

When they were within a mile of town, Bob pulled up.

"What's the idea?" Les asked.

"I want you to go in alone. Find out if Hog Smith has showed up. I'll give you an hour, Les. I'll look for you in front of Pike's. If he's there, just lift your hat when I ride by. Now, I don't want you to get mixed up in this. If Smith is there, I'm going after him."

Les had his own ideas about that, but he said nothing. He had a wide acquaintance among the professional gamblers in Wild Horse. On reaching town, he questioned a number of them and drifted in and out of the saloons. Wherever he went, the answer was the same: Hog Smith had not been seen.

With time to spare, Les settled down on the hotel porch, still hoping that Hog would put in an appearance. Nothing came of it, and he was waiting in front of Pike's store, when he saw Bob coming. He walked out into the street and stopped him.

"He ain't showed his face, Maxwell. Some of the boys tell me he was up in the mountains at Montano's sheep camp for a few days. He pulled out of there last week and ain't been heard of since. Chances are he's over around Holbrook, tryin' to organize a new bunch."

"He's been gone a long time," said Bob, not trying to conceal his disappointment. "You're sure he isn't hanging out at the Whisky Ranch?"

"That was the first place I asked about. He ain't out there. I got that straight."

"All right," Bob muttered. "I'm going down to the Sandovals. I'll be there an hour or so. I've got nothing to do after that. I'll stall around until early afternoon and head for home. Where will I find you?"

"Pick me up here," Les told him.

They parted with that, and Les recrossed the street and resumed his vigil on the Barrett House porch.

Pia was in the shop with her father. She wasn't dressed for Bob's coming, but on catching sight of him, she rushed out to greet him. Though he had carried her image in his heart, he found her lovelier than his fondest memory. He stepped down quickly and caught her hands.

Pia read his thought as his eyes searched her. "*Madre de Dios*, no!" she gasped. "Don't take me in your arms, here on the street, Roberto!"

"If I but could—only for a moment!" He drew in his breath and smothered his longing for her.

From the doorway Antonio called, "Come in, Roberto! Come in!"

The little man embraced him. "I'm so glad you have come back to us," he said warmly. "Has Pia told you how our hearts bled for you over Luis? We have had some masses read for the repose of his soul. It was so little, and yet there was nothing more we could do."

"It was thoughtful of you," Bob said tensely. "For the last three or four years Luis and I hadn't seen much of each other, until we came out here. Being together these past few weeks gave us a chance to get acquainted again. I didn't realize at what cost, till he was gone. I don't know why, but I always figured if one of us was cut down, I'd be the one."

"No, Roberto!" Pia cried. "I can't bear to hear you say it."

"It didn't happen that way, but it's true," Bob insisted, his mouth turning hard. "There's no law here to square Luis's account. I don't propose to let it go at that." His eyes were on Pia. "You know what I've got to do."

She nodded, her throat too tight for words.

Her father said, "You will only be doing your duty. I knew how you would feel. The man is still in hiding. When you face him, may God be with you!"

Pia stiffened and her fingers tightened desperately on the edge of the counter. "Why must these things be?" she asked. "This despicable Hog Smith deserves killing a dozen times over. But killing him isn't enough; he must be warned—met in a fair fight, as though he were an honorable man!"

She went to the door and stood there, her eyes torn with anxiety. With her back to them she said bitterly, "Why should such a man be shown such consideration? He'll show you none, Roberto. He'll ask nothing better than an opportunity to take you by surprise."

"Pia—you don't understand," Bob protested.

"I understand perfectly!" she cried, turning on him excitedly, her breasts rising and falling with her deep breathing. "He killed Luis; I don't want him to kill you! I—I—"

A sob shook her and she couldn't go on. Her eyes wet, she gathered up her skirts and ran through the shop into the living-quarters. Bob would have followed, but Antonio stopped him.

"No, Roberto," he advised soberly, "it will be better if you say nothing; let her fight this out with herself." He sighed heavily. "This opens my eyes. I hadn't realized how much you mean to her."

Bob said unhappily, "I had hoped it would be all over before I saw her. I can't run away from this, and I can't get down to Hog Smith's level. Pia would hate me if I did."

"You couldn't make her believe it right now." The little man's face was stern. "Later, it would be true. Women are like that, Roberto. Don't let it disturb you too much; I know your way is the only way to handle this matter—if you would hold your head up among honorable men. If one can not do that, what is the use of anything?"

He went back to his bench and invited Bob to take a chair. They sat there, saying nothing.

Antonio started to speak several times before he finally broke his long silence. "I should have left Wild Horse long ago," he said, his face as grave as it usually was merry. "We have our church—our friends—but this is no atmosphere in which to raise a family. I could have prospered somewhere else; I didn't have to remain here and expose Pia and the boy to all these rogues and desperados. Not that they haven't been safe enough—up to now. You know about Little Dick?"

"Yeh," Bob replied.

"He was my friend," the little saddlemaker said softly. "He was a bandit—may God forgive him his many transgressions!—but he was my friend, and I am not ashamed to say so. If he wasn't a gentleman, he at least had the instincts of one. I am indebted to him in many ways."

Bob had only to recall what Les Quade had said about the mantle of protection Little Dick had placed around Antonio Sandoval and his family to understand him.

"You've got to face the fact that he won't be showing up again," Bob said. "How much difference is it going to make?"

"I don't know," Antonio replied, shaking his head dubiously. "It will make some difference. I have warned Pia that she is not to be seen on the street unaccompanied. Going to the river, for the washing, that's all right; but she is not to go to the stores, nor even to church, alone. At my urging, Padre Donates has advised the other men of the parish to be equally careful of their womenfolk. There are so many of us, and yet we have no rights; no way of getting even a measure of justice. You have become so Americanized, Roberto, that you escape most of the discrimination and contempt that so many of us must endure."

"I've felt it too often to forget it," was Bob's tight-lipped response. "I know what it means to be regarded as an inferior by some because my skin is dark."

"Then you can appreciate how I feel." Antonio Sandoval's eyes flashed as Pia's often did. "My people and yours—on your mother's side—were here for hundreds of years before the *Americanos* came to push us aside—not only in this region, but all over the Southwest. Everywhere it's been the same. It's our people who do the hard work, for miserable wages, and to what end? To be insulted and scorned!

"Things are not as bad as they were when I was a young man. You no longer see the signs on the restaurant and saloon doors in the larger towns: 'No Indians and Mexicans Allowed.' But they were there for years. You know how it is in the river towns—our people living in miserable *jacales* that are not fit for wild beasts. Do they live like that because they like it? Hah!

You know they cannot afford any better!" The little man's voice rose excitedly. "If they can neither read nor write, is it because they want to be ignorant? That is too stupid for belief, you think? I have heard it said—and worse!"

Bob had not believed the usually even-tempered little man capable of such a fervid outburst. Antonio was not through.

"We are Americans—as good as the next man! All we ask is to be recognized as such. Thank God for such men as Matt Garner—men who are big enough to accept a person for what he is! Once at 7-11, Matt asked me to stay for supper. Orv Pickett rode in as we were about to sit down. Pickett saw me and when Matt invited him to join us, Pickett said he wasn't in the habit of sitting at the table with greasers. Matt jumped all over him—told him I was welcome at his table any time."

"What did Pickett do?" Bob demanded thinly.

"He was a long way from home and hungry. He sat down with us. It didn't seem to hurt him any. That was years ago. Pickett and I are friendly enough today, but I've never forgotten that evening." He spread his hands apologetically. "I don't usually get carried away like this; I keep it locked up in here." He tapped his chest. "Once in a while it has to come out."

He unlocked a drawer under the counter and found a folded piece of paper.

"Here is a list of the names you wanted," he said. "I haven't overlooked anyone. There are nine in all. I am sorry to have to tell you there is no Tex in Wild Horse who could be suspected of having had a hand in the robbery at Alamosa. The job fits none of them."

Bob took the list and went over it carefully. The names were all strange to him. The notations regarding each were of a character to bear out what he had said.

"I am as disappointed as you, Roberto. Tex Cutter was a possibility—until I learned that a horse had thrown him and broken his leg three or four days before the robbery. Wash Priddy must have been mistaken. He is very old."

"Yeh, but his mind is keen," Bob argued. "I can't believe he was mistaken. What about the men Doc Morrell runs with? Were you able to check on them?"

Antonio nodded. "There are just two—Billy Dexter, the one who was killed in Las Animas, and Ike Legrand."

"Dexter—I figured he was one. No question but what they were the three who raided Alamosa. Is Legrand here?"

"I saw him a day or two ago. If you see a bowlegged man, with a bad knife scar on his chin, in Morrell's company, that will be Ike Legrand. You are not going to question him?"

"No, it would be useless. How does he wear his gun—left or right hip? Think hard."

"On the right hip. I made the holster for him."

"And that's where Dexter wore his gun." Bob got the words out tonelessly. "It leaves only Morrell. He killed Tom."

"That I can believe!" said Antonio. "But where is the proof?"

"I'll get it," Bob declared grimly. "Somewhere—somehow—I'll find it!"

Pia's father took the list of names and touched a match to the paper. As he and Bob sat there watching it burn,

a man hurried to the door. When it opened, Les Quade stood there, his eyes hard in his rocky face. Bob popped to his feet.

"He's here, Maxwell," Les growled. "Just rode in from the west. He pulled up at the El Paso. He's in there now."

"Is he alone, Les?"

"He rode in alone."

Bob stood there for a moment, wanting to leave some message for Pia, but the words wouldn't come. Turning to Les, he said quietly, "Let's go."

They stepped out and Bob untied his horse. Leading the animal, he and Les started up the street.

"Why bother with the bronc?" Les monotoned.

"I'll leave it up by the blacksmith shop. I don't want it found here; no reason for the Sandovals to get mixed up in this."

Bob saw a 7-11 bronc tethered at the hitch rack opposite the blacksmith shop and recognized it for Les's mount. He crossed the street and put his horse in beside the other.

"No, Maxwell!" Les objected violently as Bob pulled the sawed-off shotgun out of the saddle boot. "Your forty-five will be faster; Hog will fade you if you go after him with that cannon!"

"That'll be all right," Bob muttered, his face so tightly drawn that his cheekbones stood out. "This gun never failed the man who packed it for years. I'll try to see that it doesn't fail me—You keep behind me a few yards."

With the gun cradled in the crook of his left arm, he went up the sidewalk with measured stride, his shoulders rolling ever so slightly and his eyes narrowed and alert.

Something electric kept pace with him. Even in Wild Horse a man with a cocked sawed-off shotgun at the ready could not move along the sidewalk without attracting immediate attention. Saloon loungers stiffened and whipped around to stare. From the hotel door Doc Morrell saw him as he passed. Morrell froze in his tracks, in no doubt as to what impended.

Bob took it for granted that he had been seen when he rode by the El Paso that morning. If so, his presence in town was known to Hog by now, giving him the choice between running and stepping out for a showdown.

Three ponies stood at the rack in front of the El Paso. One was a big, long-legged roan, such a horse as a man of Hog Smith's size would require. The thought had no more than crossed Bob's mind, when the swing doors of the saloon were flung wide and Hog pushed through. He crossed the sidewalk quickly, pretending not to have seen Bob, who was only fifty feet away, and struck out into the street.

"Hog!" Bob called.

The big fellow didn't stop.

"Hold it!" Bob rapped, following him into the road. "Don't make me shoot you in the back."

Hog wanted to run, but he knew a hundred eyes were watching him. He stopped convulsively and slapped a hand to his gun. Rising slightly on his toes, he spun around and fired.

His first shot was so wild it shattered one of the El Paso's windows. The second one carried Bob's hat away. That was all; the sawed-off shotgun roared and the slugs tore the flesh from Hog's bones. He went down on his face and after rolling around for a moment, he was still.

Bob walked up to him warily and turned him over with the toe of his boot. What he saw satisfied him. Breaking his gun, he shoved a fresh shell

into the empty barrel and turned back down the street.

Shep Smiley, the town marshal, had witnessed the shooting from the security of the Barrett House porch. Doc Morrell tapped him on the shoulder. "Get out there and do your duty!"

Smiley gazed at him in open-mouthed amazement. "Yuh—yuh mean arrest him? He ain't done nuthin'—Hog had the first shot."

"I don't give a damn about Hog Smith!" Morrell raged. He had an audience by now, which was what he wanted. "How long do you think we'll last around here if a cowpoke can ride in and get away with anythin' like this? Lock him up! If you need help, there's plenty of it!"

There was angry approval from a dozen bystanders. Smiley wiped his mouth with a nervous swipe of his hand. "All right," he muttered weakly. "All right."

Chapter Eleven

"We'll Give That Crowd Hell!"

"SURE somebody put Smiley up to it!" Les Quade growled his agreement with Pia's father. "That stinkin', white-livered worm wouldn't had the guts to poke a gun in Maxwell's ribs and march him off to the *cárcel* unless he had a lot of backin'. Lockin' him up for breakin' the peace! Godamighty if that wouldn't freeze your bunions!"

"It's only an excuse for arresting him. Whoever is behind this will try to whip up so much feeling among his kind that a mob will go up the jail. Smiley is hand in glove with that element; he'll turn Roberto over to them after they let him make a little show of resistance."

Les had hurried to the shop, believing it was what Bob would have had him do. "I can't understand it," he said. "I never figgered Hog Smith was that strong in Wild Horse."

"He meant nothing," Antonio declared flatly. "But this is the first time that anyone has dared to ride into Wild Horse and kill one of these renegades. That is what is important, my friend. It might be the beginning of something, you understand. Unless I am badly mistaken, it's the argument that will be used to stir up the others. By such means, an ambitious man might even hope to make himself the leader of all these desperados."

"Yeh—especially if he happened to be a fool as well!" Les ground out. "By God, I can name him for you Sandoval! —Doc Morrell!"

"Morrell," the little man echoed soberly. "Yes."

Pia had seen Bob leave with Quade. A few minutes later she had heard the exchange of shots. Filled with terror, she had locked her door and thrown herself on the bed. Time stood still for her, and it seemed she had lain there for hours, when her father hurried back to tell her the news Les had brought. For the moment, it seemed unimportant that Bob was in jail; he was safe. That was enough! She dropped to her knees and expressed her gratitude to the Holy Mother for protecting him.

But when she got hold of herself she realized that Bob was in even greater danger now than when he faced Hog Smith's gun. Stealing to the door, she

had heard most of what her father and Les said. She burst in on them now.

"Can't something be done?" she cried. "You know what a mob will do to him!"

"Ma'am, I'm hittin' the high spots for the ranch right now," Les assured her. "It'll take us a few hours, but when we git back, we won't come alone. By the middle of the afternoon you'll see half a hundred of us pourin' into Wild Horse. My advice to you is to lock the doors and keep inside."

He ran out to his horse and raced off in the direction of the river. Following the trail along the bank, he swung around town, avoiding the chance of being stopped, and struck the main road a mile east of Wild Horse. He knew Stony Williams and his wagonload of supplies was somewhere ahead of him. Riding at a driving gallop, he overtook Stony a short distance west of the ford. The latter lost his boredom as Les told him what had happened and what he wanted him to do.

"Whip up this team and git home in nuthin' flat! You understand, Stony?"

"Yup!"

"You tell Garner I'm on my way over to git Taylor's bunch!" Raking his bronc, Les sped away in a cloud of dust.

Matt had his men ready to ride when Les arrived with Reb Taylor and his crew.

"What about Coulter and Big John?" Reb asked.

"I sent word to Diamond and a Half and Currycomb," Matt answered, clipping his words. "I told 'em to join up with us a little distance east of town. If we git movin' right away, we oughta be ridin' in about four o'clock. I hope to God we'll be in time! We'll make an issue of this, Reb. It ain't the big roundup I figgered on, but we'll give that crowd hell!"

They made good time, and when they swept into Wild Horse, Matt, Taylor, Jim Coulter, and Big John Moffat leading the way, it was only a few minutes after four, as Matt had predicted.

That no word of their coming had preceded them was evident. A mob of half a hundred men was gathered about the jail, a small adobe with a barred window front and rear. It was built in the Mexican style, with the floor several feet below the street surface, for the sake of coolness. Steps led down into it. Shep Smiley stood there, the sawed-off shotgun he had taken from Bob in his hands. No one was going to be able to say he hadn't tried to defend his prisoner.

It was just a game. The mob knew it and whooped it up accordingly. The shouting and tumult died suddenly as the troop of armed riders swung around the corner of the church yard, a long city block away. Seeing his work about to be undone, Morrell found his tongue.

"Stand your ground!" he yelled. "Don't let that bunch bluff you!"

Matt Garner wasn't bluffing. He flung up his hand in a previously agreed-on signal. Guns growled and a hail of slugs kicked up spurts of dust about the mob. If the shots were low and no one was hit, that was by prearrangement, too.

It convinced Morrell's followers, and it convinced him. When the mob broke, he fled with the others. Some found their horses. As many more darted in between the buildings and escaped over the hill into Rawhide

Gulch. When the cowmen pulled up before the jail, only Shep Smiley was left to face them, and by his look, he obviously wished himself somewhere else.

Matt and the other owners got down from the saddle and marched up to him, their faces resolute.

"Open up!" Matt ordered. "Open up and fetch Maxwell out here!"

"Why—why, Matt, I can't turn him over to yuh. I'm holdin' him fer the jedge, in the mornin'. I wouldn't let that mob have him, and I ain't goin' to turn him over to yore crowd." Smiley was talking brave, but it was only talk. "If yuh want him, see the jedge and git him to give yuh a paper."

"Why, you miserable low-down blowfly, don't you tell us to go lookin' for Ben East! Open up this rat trap or we'll pull it down!"

"You heard him!" barked Les.

Taylor's men, Diamond and a Half, Currycomb, 7-11 took it up. They filled the street from sidewalk to sidewalk—forty, fifty of them! Shep Smiley's Adam's apple seemed to run up and down his scrawny neck.

"All right," he muttered. "I reckon yuh mean it."

He unlocked the door and disappeared inside. A moment later, the waiting men heard a cell door clank as it was thrown open. They cheered when Bob walked out with the marshal.

"There he is!" Smiley growled. He ran his eye over Matt and the other owners. "The four of yuh are responsible for this demonstration. Yuh know yo're breakin' the law—forcin' me to hand this man over to yuh!"

"Law!" Big John Moffat snorted scornfully. "Blackleg law, you mean! Before we git through, we'll give this town a bigger dose of real honest-to-God law than it's had in years!"

"Smiley, what have you done with Maxwell's hoss?" Matt demanded.

"I got it around in back."

"Git it," Matt ordered. "We don't want no more yammerin' outa you."

"And I'll take my gun," said Bob.

Smiley handed it over readily enough. Snapping his suspenders angrily, he shuffled off.

Bob saw Les and moved over to him as Matt and his fellow cowmen conferred. "You didn't let any grass grow under your feet, Les," he said, grinning. "I'm obliged to you."

"Forgit it," Les grumbled. "I saw the Sandovals. You better drop down there and leave the rest of this ruckus to us; we can handle it."

Unnoticed, a man had crawled across the roof of the Barrett House. Shoving a rifle over the cornice, he began firing. A horse squealed as it was struck. A moment later, a slug tore through the leg of a Diamond and a Half man. It ended the momentary disagreement between Jim Coulter and the others.

"There you are!" Matt yelped. "Don't talk to me about halfway measures! Git that gent up there!"

Rifles cracked and the bullets made a sieve of the tin cornice. The sniper reared up and pitched forward. There he hung, draped over the edge of the roof.

The Diamond and a Half man was not seriously injured. It was enough, however, to make Jim Coulter change his tune.

"You're right, Garner," he growled. "We'll clean out the saloons and run all this scum across the river. If they want to make a fight of it, we'll accommodate 'em!"

Matt gave the word. Diamond and a

Half took one side of the street; 7-11 the other. Reb led a group of men around in back of the buildings on the right; Big John did the same on the left. The toughs had long since fled and only the bartenders and proprietors remained. Some of them got rough treatment; windows were smashed and mirrors shattered.

Bob had no thought of dropping out of the fight. He was at Matt's side when the old man marched into the hotel with his men. Cap Null confronted them, protesting at what he called this unwarranted invasion of his property.

"Git outa the way!" Matt blazed. "Any sass out of you and we'll touch a match to this thieves' den!"

"Now see here, Garner," Cap tried to argue, "I didn't have nothin' to do with havin' your man locked up. I'm no damned fool. All I wanted was to be let alone."

"If it wa'n't yore idea, whose was it?"

"Doc Morrell's! You'll be doin' me a favor if you fill that idiot full of lead!"

It didn't surprise Bob. He got a confirming nod from Les.

"Who's upstairs?" Matt asked. "And I don't mean the gent who's hangin' over the roof."

"Nobody," Cap told him.

"We'll see about that!"

Half a dozen men went through the rooms above but found no one. 7-11 tramped out and continued to work its side of the street. Shopkeepers had locked their doors and shuttered their windows. Save for the men from the ranches, the main street was deserted. All over town, men and women of Spanish ancestory, had barricaded themselves indoors or taken refuge in the church.

The other groups joined 7-11 at the lower end of the street and they proceeded en masse over the ridge into Rawhide Gulch. A dozen men leaped to their ponies and fled at once.

"Look at 'em!" Big John Moffat cried. "Runnin' like rats! The whole pack of 'em has got acrost the river!"

"That's where we want 'em, John!" Matt stood up in his stirrups and got the attention of the men. "They've most likely forted up at the Whisky Ranch!" he shouted. "We'll surround the house! If they open up on us, let 'em have it!"

They turned back to the crossing and dashed across the Rio Dolores. Fifteen minutes later they had a ring thrown around the ranch. Save for what remained of a rock corral, the sun-blistered old house stood by itself, gaunt and brooding, on a grassless flat. Not a shot came from it.

Matt gave the word and the circle contracted warily. Bob, Les Quade, and two others reached the stone corral without being fired on. From there, a few minutes later, they made a dash for the door and reached it unopposed.

A quick searching of the old house revealed that it was deserted.

"They didn't strike north when they pulled out from here," Jim Coulter declared confidently. "Too much desert up that way. They're headin' west."

There was a general nodding of agreement.

"They'll hit the hills and separate," said Bob. "That always makes sense."

Johnnie Landers, the Diamond and a Half rider, rode up to the door. "I picked up their trail! They're makin' for the Mormon Hills, and travelin' fast, if I know anythin' about readin' sign!"

In easy stages the Mormon Hills, rising from the Las Animas Plains, marched up to the backbone of the Continental Divide. With little more than two hours of daylight left, Matt wisely decided that any thought of cutting around the fleeing enemy had to be abandoned.

"The best we can do is chase 'em," he declared.

"That's true," said Big John, "but if they intend to keep on runnin', they can move as fast as we can; we'll only be chasin' 'em up toward the Divide."

"I know it," Matt agreed readily. "But since it's the only thing we can do, let's git goin'! They may not run as far as we think."

The next hour seemed to prove him mistaken, as, proceeding in three columns, they reached higher and higher into the hills. And then, when talk of turning back was growing, gunfire off to the left from Coulter's contingent swung all that way.

They arrived in time to see the enemy darting across the upper reaches of a long, steep valley.

"They ain't far away, but it'll take time to get up there!" Coulter called out. "They'll be gone by then. That's why I told the boys to open up on 'em."

The sense of that was apparent. Rifles began to crack all along the line. The fire was not returned. Finally, Matt flung up his hand.

"That's enough!" he yelled. "They're gone!"

"I don't know how much damage we done," Reb Taylor remarked. "But even at that distance, it don't seem we could throw all that lead without hittin' somebody."

Matt shook his head, a puzzled look on his round face. "I don't git the answer to this. There's as many of 'em as us. They all ain't yellow. But we didn't draw a single shot!"

"If you don't get what it means, I'll tell you," hard-headed Jim Coulter declared. "They figure that by not shooting it out with us they can sneak back to Wild Horse as soon as the heat is off. That's their game. We'll have this to do all over again."

"By grab, we proved we can do it!" Matt growled. "If we have to do it a second time, we can!"

Les fell in beside Bob on the long ride back. He agreed completely with what Coulter had said.

"That bunch must be laughin' at us," he said fiercely. "We had a lot of 'em dead to rights when they was itchin' to git their fingers on you. If they had, they'd have jerked you to Jesus in a hurry. But we fire a warnin' blast and give 'em a chance to run. We shoulda cut 'em to pieces. You don't git nowheres, bein' soft with guys like them."

"I know you don't," Bob agreed. "But you can't cut them down like sheep."

"Why not—if that's what they got comin' to 'em?"

After a minute or two, he was back with something else. "What Cap Null said about Morrell didn't surprise you, Maxwell. Did you know he was responsible for the little party they were givin' you?"

"No. I heard him out there, whipping the mob up. I didn't know the whole thing was his idea."

Les gave him a shrewd glance. "You said you expected to have some trouble with Morrell. Reckon you'll have some for sure now."

"I'll add it to the score I've got against him," said Bob. He heard Les's mirthless laugh. "What's so funny?"

"The way you said that. It told me plenty. I wasn't so wrong about you and Luis, at that. You had somethin' on your mind, just as I figgered. I miss my guess if Doc Morrell ain't at the other end of it!"

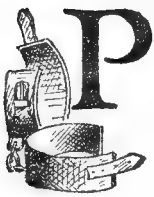
Darkness was settling by the time they reached the Whisky Ranch. Matt and the other owners had been talking. When they pulled up, they knew what they wanted to do.

"Boys, we're goin' to have a little bonfire," Matt said. "Some of you git down and touch a match to this dump."

A dozen men responded eagerly. In a few minutes the tinder-dry house was going up in flames. With grim satisfaction, the posse watched the fire burn to the ground.

Chapter Twelve

Law Badge



PIA'S knees trembled as she saw Bob filling the doorway, tall, smiling, unharmed. With a glad cry, she rushed into his arms. Her father turned his back on them that they might have the privacy of this moment.

"I'm sorry I gave you such a bad day," Bob said, his voice husky with emotion as he crushed her to him. "Forget your tears, Pia. Let me see you smile again!"

He lifted her face and saw a smile touch it. Eagerly then, she surrendered her lips to him.

When her father thought he had waited long enough, he said, "G-ar-r-umph," deep in his throat. Pia turned to him, her eyes shining.

"If you are ready to come down out of the clouds," he told her, "I'd like to suggest that Roberto has not had a bite to eat today. You were saving something, in the hope that he would come. I imagine he would appreciate having his supper. Don't tell me it is only because I'm old that I dare to think of food." He winked at Bob. "I, too, was young once—and very romantic. But I remember distinctly that I used to get hungry."

"That I can believe!" Pia exclaimed with a flash of the gaiety that Bob had come to expect from her. "Mamma used to tell me that when you were courting her, she might not see you for days; but let there be a fresh pot of chile on the stove and you would be there in an hour." She glanced at Bob. "Don't tell me that is what I am to expect from you."

"I don't know; it could be," he declared, matching her bantering tone. "I hadn't thought of food all day. Now that it's been mentioned, I'm ravenous."

"Come!" she told him. "Sixto has already been put to bed. You and father can sit at the table and talk as much as you please; I'll have your supper ready in a minute or two."

Bob found Pia's father well informed regarding what had occurred in Wild Horse during the day.

"When I saw the glow in the sky, I knew at once it was the Whisky Ranch that was burning. That should have been done years ago, Roberto. If the renegades come back, and I believe they will, they will at least be put to some inconvenience."

"Coulter says they'll be back and that we'll have this to do all over again," Bob told him. "All we could do was chase them up toward the Divide."

"How far did you go?"

"What they call the Mormon Hills. You may know them."

The little man nodded. "I used to hunt up there." He beckoned for Bob to bend closer. "The man who was killed on the roof of the hotel—you know who he was?"

"No."

"Ike Legrand."

"That doesn't surprise me," Bob said guardedly. "Morrell stirred up things against me. So he's the only one of the three that's left! Maybe that's just as well."

Pia had rolled up her sleeves and donned an apron. When she came to the table and spread a cloth, he gazed at her with fresh admiration, thinking how wonderful it would be to have her in his own home some day.

"I'm ready," she said. "It took me a little longer than I thought. I made fresh coffee for you, Roberto; the pot's been on the stove all day as usual."

She placed before him a bowl of chile con carne, a dish of red beans, swimming in their own flavorsome broth, thick-crusted bread, baked in an outdoor oven, and a pot of home-made cheese, tangy with chopped chives. Bob gazed at the spread with delight. Pia's father eyed it approvingly, too.

"Suppose you set a place for yourself and one for me," he told her. "You have had nothing but a cup of coffee since morning and I have had no appetite till now."

With the day's tensions removed, the food was doubly appetizing. The company was so good and the old room so comfortable that time passed unnoticed as they sat there eating and talking.

Bob had asked Les to come for him when Matt and the crew were ready to pull out for the ranch. He heard Les calling for him now.

"That's Les Quade, come for me," he said. He asked Antonio if he would tell Les that he would be out in a moment. Left alone with Pia, he took her in his arms.

"I don't know how to tell you what is in my heart," he murmured. "I love you. You are my life, Pia— It leaves so much unsaid—"

"No!" she whispered, deep in his embrace. "What more is there to say, my love?" And after a moment: "I know you must go now. You will come again soon?"

"As soon as I can arrange it. The town will be quiet for a day or two. Don't let it deceive you. Your father is right; don't go on the street alone. Will you promise me that?"

"You have my promise, Roberto. Come back to me—and come soon!"

An argument was taking place in front of Pike's. In the light from the store windows, Bob saw that Matt had Shep Smiley cornered against the building. Taylor's crew and 7-11 stood watching. Currycomb and the other outfits had already left for home.

"Don't tell me jailin' Maxwell was yore own idea!" the old man thundered. "You was put up to it—by Doc Morrell, Cap Null says! It was Morrell's sidekick that you scraped off the hotel roof, wa'n't it?"

"Garner, I'm under pressure in this town! I catch hell from ever'body!" Smiley protested. "What kin I do? Yuh know who elected me!"

"And by grab, I know who'll bury you if you pull another trick like this on one of my men! We've had enough of you and Ben East, and the first time you catch that old whiskyhead sober

enough to understand what yo're sayin', tell him I said so!"

Bristling fiercely, Matt got in the saddle. Reb and the others followed him out of town.

Work was resumed the following morning as though there had been no interruption. A new pole corral had to be built and completed before the beef cut that was to be made in Three Springs was brought down, in another two weeks. Young cedars had to be felled and dressed. Matt sent half a dozen men into the foothills. Bob and Les remained below and began setting up the corral as the poles were delivered.

When the two of them walked back to the bunkhouse several evenings later, Les glanced across the yard and said, "We got company."

Bob looked that way and saw Buck Childress seated on the gallery with the old man.

"He's your friend. Why not go over?" Les suggested.

"I'll wash up a bit and let him finish his business with Matt," said Bob, speculating as Les was on what had brought the sheriff out from Las Animas.

The rest of the crew drifted in. The supper bell rang presently. Matt and Childress still sat on the gallery. When Bob and the others came across the yard, the old man beckoned to him.

Buck shoved out his hand and said, "Hi, Bob! I'm goin' to spend the night with Matt. After supper, I want to sit down with you and have a little talk."

"Is it something about Tom?"

Buck shook his head. "Not directly. Matt tells me you got Hog Smith."

"Yeh."

"Good riddance," said Buck. "The day got a little rough, I understand."

"It was pretty rugged," Bob admitted unsmilingly.

Matt got out of his chair. "Let's go in and eat."

Bob sat down beside Les. The latter continued to wield his knife and fork and not only had no questions but even failed to look up. This indifference didn't fool Bob; he knew Les was waiting for an explanation.

"It's nothing to do with what happened the other day," he said, after letting him wait a few minutes.

"I didn't think it was," Les grumbled.

"What did you think?" Bob asked.

"He ain't foolin' me," Les declared, hedging now. "Buck Childress is almost as much a stranger here as the President of the United States. He ain't makin' the long ride just for the exercise."

"Sounds like you don't know any more about it than I do," Bob taunted. "He wants to have a talk with me this evening."

Supper was just about over when Reb Taylor rode into the yard and left his horse at the rack. He looked into the dining-room.

"You eaten, Reb?" Matt called to him. And when the visitor nodded, the old man said, "Go into the office and make yoreself comfortable. We'll be with you in a minute."

Bob was on his way out. Childress stopped him. "I've asked Reb and a few others to show up here this evenin'. I want to talk to them first. I'll call you in later. It may be an hour or two."

Bob gave him a sharp glance. "You make it sound important."

Buck nodded. "It is."

Within the next half hour, Jim Coulter, Big John, and Orv Pickett arrived

and went into the house at once. The crew, lounging about the bunkhouse, could only guess at the purpose of the meeting.

"We'll be goin' back to Wild Horse," Tex Drury predicted. "Childress will swear ever'body in this time and make it nice and legal."

Inside, Bob and Les sat around a table playing stud with three others. "Did you hear that, Maxwell?" Les stopped dealing to inquire.

"It's too soon for that," Bob asserted. "Whatever this is it's urgent, or Buck wouldn't have asked Pickett and the others to meet him here tonight. Deal the cards and get on with the game."

It was after nine o'clock when Matt stepped out on the gallery. "Bob! Come over here!" he called. "We're in the front room!"

Bob picked up his money and another man took his place at the table. But the other players had lost interest in the game.

"What do yuh suppose they want of him?" Skip Lavelle asked, as Bob stepped out.

"He's got somethin' they need," Les said thinly. "Principally guts, I reckon —or mebbe it's brains." He threw down his cards. "Deal me out!"

"Bob, yo're acquainted with all of us except Orv Pickett, over there in the corner." Pickett, a thin, sun-dried man with a cadaverous face, jerked an impersonal nod, and Matt said, "Sit down! I'll let Buck do the talkin'."

The sheriff flipped a cigarette into shape, saying, "I'll give it to you in a nutshell. The commissioners have voted enough money for me to hire a full-time deputy, to take over the western end of the county and make his headquarters in Wild Horse. The pay will be nine hundred a year and certain expenses. That's little enough, considerin' the nature of the job. It'll be a case of one man against a hundred; crowd one of those law busters and you crowd 'em all. To get away with it, a man will have to have iron nerve and never take a backward step."

Buck paused to light his cigarette.

"You know there's no law out here," he continued. "At one time or another I've told every man in this room that if they wanted law and order they'd have to bring it themselves, quit their quarrelin' and stand together. A show of force such as was used the other day just proves my point. The right man, with that sort of backin', can tame Wild Horse."

"We've given you our word he'll have it," Big John spoke up. "If Pickett's lukewarm about it, let him back out; we did all right without him." He was referring to an argument that had taken place before Bob was called in.

"I'm interested in puttin' down rustlin'!" Pickett flared back. "I ain't interested in goin' after bank bandits and train robbers who ain't hurtin' me none!"

"Orv, that's the damnedest nonsense you ever spoke," Jim Coulter declared. "We wiped out Hog Smith's gang, but leave that nest of thieves and outlaws alone and they'll sprout a new crop of rustlers before we get turned around. And they'll keep on doin' it."

"We've got the choice between cleanin' the riffraff out of this country and stringin' barbed wire," Reb Taylor said, his tone sharp with the bad feel-

ing that existed between Orv and himself. "Pickett may have a better idea of who's hurtin' him when he has to dip into his pocket for eight to ten thousand dollars to fence himself in."

Pickett glared around the room. He wasn't liked here, and he knew it. If he had leaped to his feet and stormed out in a huff, it would have surprised no one.

"That's jest yore opinion, Taylor, and I don't know that it's any better than mine!" he whipped out angrily. "Moffat says you can git along without me. If that's so, why was I asked here?"

"You're a big man in this end of the county," Buck told him. "I asked you to come because I figgered you'd want to hold up your end."

"So I do!" Pickett averred.

"Then git the chip off your shoulder, and let me finish." Buck had endured Pickett's wrangling for the better part of an hour and he wanted no more of it. Turning back to Bob, he said, "The other day, when the commissioners called me in and told me I could have the money, they asked me who I had in mind for the job. I didn't have to stop and think twice. I said you were the man I wanted.

"I know it's askin' a great deal of you; every thug and renegade in Wild Horse will be out to pull you down till you convince them you mean business and are there to stay. On the other hand, if I didn't believe you could handle the job, I wouldn't ask you to take it. I told these gentlemen I wanted you. We talked it over at length before I asked Matt to call you in. You're a stranger to Pickett, so he has no opinion about you; the others agree that I could look the county over and not find a better man. What do you say, Bob?"

The silence deepened as they hung on the tall man's answer. "It's a great honor," he said at last. "As you all know, there's Spanish blood in me. I've been called a greaser. For that reason alone, I appreciate your confidence in me and the honor it would be to my people. But I don't see how I can take the job. I'm sure Buck knows why I say that."

"You mean on account of somethin' you took on before you came out here?"

"Yeh. I don't want anything to interfere with that. When you swore me in, I'd have to take an oath to uphold the law. I don't see how I could do it." Bob looked to the old man. "You understand what I'm saying, Matt, and so does Buck; the others don't. They're entitled to some sort of an explanation. But what can I say?"

"Suppose I say it for you," Buck interjected. "You and Luis came out here lookin' for a man who deserves killin'. You think you've located him in Wild Horse. As soon as you're sure he's the one, you want to be free to go after him."

"That's it," Bob muttered.

"Wal, the last thing I'd ask of you would be to let up on him. It ain't the letter of the written law this country needs; it's the spirit of it—justice for honest men—that's needed first. It'll be time enough to think about the orderly processes of the law after the thieves and gunmen have been driven out."

"That's what we want, Maxwell," Big John Moffat declared solemnly. "No more of this Shep Smiley, Ben East kind of law. You let Buck swear you in. I've seen enough of you to know you're the man for the job. I pledge you my word I'll go all the way with you."

"Them's my sentiments," Orv Pickett growled. The others were more outspoken in their endorsement.

Bob said quietly, "If you all feel that way about it, I guess it's up to me to say yes."

Buck got to his feet. "I have the authority to deputize you and I can give you the official oath but you'll have to appear before a judge of the district court or a justice of the peace and repeat it. We'll go into town tomorrow and see Ben East. I want to have a talk with him anyhow. Raise your right hand and repeat after me: 'I, Roberto Maxwell, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution and government of the United States, and the Constitution and government of the State of New Mexico, against all enemies, whether domestic or foreign—and, er—"

Buck didn't know the oath too well and began to fumble over it, but finally managed to complete it.

Bob stood stiffly erect as Childress pinned a silver star on him and shook his hand.

"The longer you wear that badge, Bob, the more you'll appreciate what it means. It won't make things safe and easy for you, but it'll bring you through when nothin' else will. The crook who figgers he can kill you knows he can't kill what that silver star represents."

Matt and the others came up and offered their congratulations. The old man said. "This is the county's gain and my loss. I hate to lose you, Bob. When you git through with this job, come back to me; a piece of this spread will be yores."

Bob found Les waiting for him. The latter's eyes narrowed in his hard-bitten face as they fastened on the silver star.

"So you got a law badge pinned on you, after all!" he jeered. He could only shake his head. "Childress couldn't bring the law to Wild Horse, but you're goin' to do it! Are you crazy, Maxwell?"

"Perhaps I am, a little," Bob said, with the ghost of a smile. He knew that beneath the man's rocky exterior, there was a very real concern for him. "I may have to call on you to help me out."

Les glowered, his face dark with the passions and contradictions that ruled him. "You're crazy! Plumb crazy!"

Chapter Thirteen

The Law Comes to Wild Horse

WHEN Childress and Bob rode into Wild Horse the next morning they left their ponies in front of Pike's and went looking for the marshal. They found him down at the blacksmith shop. Shep blinked his eyes on seeing the silver star Bob was wearing. Buck wasn't inclined to waste any time on him.

"You got any belongin's up at the jail?" he asked.

"Naturally I have," Smiley replied. "I bin livin' there."

"Well, you'll have to clear out. The county owns the building. Maxwell's takin' it over for his headquarters. If you have a prisoner and he wants to lodge him there, that'll be up to him. You git the place cleaned up; we're goin' to see Ben now. We'll be up a little later."

Buck chuckled mirthlessly as he and Bob walked away. "That weasel didn't like the idea at all of your bein' here. It won't be twenty minutes before the news will be all over town that you've moved in. As I told you, pay no attention to Shep Smiley. Legally, he's responsible for the peace of the town; but don't let that stop you if you see somethin' that looks like real trouble. It's your duty to protect the lives and property of the citizens of this county. That gives you all the leeway you'll need."

They found Ben East at home, a disheveled, blowsy-looking old man who bore little resemblance to the respected lawyer he had been when he first established himself in Las Animas. He was having his breakfast and was comparatively sober, for him.

"Who's this you got with you, Buck?" he asked, looking Bob over carefully.

"Bob Maxwell. You may have heard of him." Ben's reaction said that he had. "He's the new deputy sheriff out here. He's given me the oath; I want you to take it from him now."

When that matter had been taken care of, the sheriff lost his cordiality. "There's goin' to be some changes in Wild Horse, Ben. It's too late to start callin' you names and remindin' you what whisky's done to you. Before you sold out to the crooks who been runnin' this town, you used to know how to be a man even when you was in your cups. If there's a spark of that left in you, you can help this boy."

"Those are hard words, Buck," the old sot protested, in a pitiful attempt to recapture a trace of his lost dignity. "I resent them deeply. I—I'm a drunkard, I admit, but you do me an injustice when you say I have sold out to the lawless element."

"Mebbe you have another word for it," was Buck's flinty response. "You've done their biddin' for years. Your record is bad; I've got evidence enough against you to have you removed from office— No, I don't want any promises from you!" he shut Ben off curtly. "I just want you to git this through your head: this end of the county's goin' to be cleaned up. I'm servin' notice on you right now."

With the judge sputtering indignantly that he wouldn't be threatened in this fashion, Childress caught Bob's eye and they walked out.

"You were pretty rough on him, Buck."

"I meant to be. It may wake him up, but I doubt it; the bottle's got him."

To reach the main street, they cut across a vacant lot that brought them out at the lower end of town. Childress was agreeable to Bob's suggestion that they see the Sandovals for a minute.

"If they haven't heard the news, they'll be agreeably surprised," Buck remarked, as they turned toward the shop. "By the way, what came of that list Tony was makin' for you?"

"Nothing. There wasn't a name on it was worth following up. The two men Morrell was working with are dead. You heard that Ike Legrand was killed the other day, of course."

Buck nodded. "It means that old Wash was either lyin' or just mistaken. We better forgit about it. You've got Morrell left. How you're goin' to prove up on him now, I don't know—unless Cap Null can be made to talk. Matt told me Cap volunteered the information that Doc was responsible for the trouble you had. When crooks fall out, they usually fall a long ways. You watch that situation, Bob; you

may be able to turn it to your advantage."

Antonio Sandoval was delighted with the turn of events. "We have waited years for the county to do something for us. You should have seen the vermin run like the rats they are, when Matt and the other cowmen went after them! The town is still quiet, though some of the thugs have drifted back already. More will come. When they see that we have a deputy sheriff stationed here, who isn't afraid of them, it will give them something to think about."

"I hope you're right, Tony," said Buck. "I know I've got the right man for the job."

Pia was pleased to know she would have Bob near her, but she could not blind herself to the danger he was inviting for himself.

"I'll make out all right," he told her, reading her thought.

Buck and he stayed only a few minutes. Before they left, Pia and her father directed him to a house near the church, where they were sure he could board economically.

After leaving the shop, Childress advised taking a turn up and down Rawhide Gulch. "Now that the Whisky Ranch is gone, most of your trouble will be hatched down in the Gulch. We'll have a look at it; I want the wimmen, as well as the men, to see that the law has arrived."

There were no sidewalks in the Gulch, just a dusty trail, with the dives standing cheek by jowl on both sides along its length. Bob and Buck found business at a standstill. Women hung out of the windows watching them; bartenders and dealers peered from the doorways.

Queenie Anderson, the Gulch's most prosperous madam, waved a fat arm at the two men and called them into her combination saloon, bagnio, and gambling-establishment. She weighed over three hundred pounds, a tremendous hulk of a woman, who seemed to roll rather than walk when she moved. Though her huge body was flabby, she was as hard as steel in her dealings. If Rawhide Gulch feared her, it was not difficult to understand. And yet she had an innocent, baby face and her secret pleasure was to cry over the trashy romantic novels she read by the dozen.

"Buck, are you aiming to clamp down on the Gulch?" The two of them had been acquainted for a quarter of a century.

"Depends on how you behave yourself, Queenie," he said with a smile. "This is Bob Maxwell, my new deputy."

Queenie moved her head an inch or two. "I've heard of him. The two of you sit down for a minute. Jack," she called to one of her idle bartenders, "see what these gentlemen will have. I've got some good brandy. Buck? Fine! Brandy, Jack—the good stuff!"

She appeared to enjoy talking to Childress. Bob sat and listened.

"I saw this coming," Queenie said. "I knew there'd be a cleanup some day. It doesn't matter so much to me any more—Butch and the boys off to South America and Little Dick and his bunch put under. It don't leave much but a gang of rat-eyed killers and saloon gladiators—and the usual scum you find in any tough frontier town. I got to go along with them, or close up." She heaved an elephantine sigh. "Whenever Butch showed up, he used to tell me to lock the door; he'd buy the place for the night. I guess we

won't be seeing no more like him."

She gave Bob a long, appraising glance. "You're a nice-looking young fella," she told him. "What makes you think you can cowhide this town? Tinhorns is the hardest kind there is to handle. Buck can tell you that."

"It's true up to a certain point," Childress conceded. "They'll find they've got a tough nut to crack in this man. I notice you've got some lumber outside, Queenie. You gittin' ready to make some improvements?"

"The place needs a new roof."

"Save your money," said Buck. "The Gulch will be as dead as boot-hill by the time snow flies. I never forgit a favor. You've done me one or two in the past. That's why I'm tippin' you off. You can guide yourself accordin'ly."

"I suppose you wonder what the purpose of all that was," Buck observed as Bob and he retraced their way to town. "I'll tell you. Queenie can take some of the heat off you if she figgers it's to her interest to do so."

They had a brief talk with Jesse Pike. He said frankly that Bob would have his support. He held out little hope, however, as to the other merchants.

"Some of them need this outlaw business, and they'll try to hang on to it as long as they can. There's others who would like to come out for you, Maxwell, but they won't declare themselves till they see which way the wind is blowing."

"Better not say anything to them at all," Bob declared. "I'll just saw wood and let them come to me."

"That's the way to play it," said Buck. "We'll walk up to the jail now and see how Smiley is doin'."

They found the marshal piling up his belongings outside the door. "Too damn bad yuh couldn't give a man a little notice," he complained bitterly.

"You got no kick comin'," Buck told him. "You've had free rent here ever since you took office." He had a look inside. "The cot belongs to you, and that's about all. You cleaned out the desk yet?"

"I will. Jest give me time."

"I'll give you another twenty minutes, and that's all. You're goin' to git a bucket of water and sluice down the floor and mop it up before you're through. I'm goin' back and have a look at the horse shed."

Bob went with him. The shed was in a filthy condition.

"You'll have to hire somebody to clean it out," said Buck. "Smiley won't do it. By the way, what are you goin' to do for horses?"

"Luis owned a pair of good broncs. Matt said he'd have one of the boys bring them in. I'll have to buy a cot and a rifle."

"You can git the cot at Jesse's. As for the rifle, take a look at mine. If you like the feel of it, I'll let you have it. It's a Winchester and a good gun." Buck squinted an eye at the sun. "The mornin' is gittin' away from me. I want to git you set before I pull out. Why don't you go down to Jesse's now and buy what you need? And you might see the woman who's goin' to give you your meals. I'll stay here and ride herd on Smiley."

It was almost noon by the time Bob was settled.

"If there's nothin' else I can do for you, I'll be on my way," Buck told him. "If you need help, you know where to git it. And keep in touch with me; the stage will always deliver

a message for you."

Bob walked out to see him off. Buck got in the saddle. Looking up at him, he could not help noticing the sober lines around his mouth.

"Don't worry about me, Buck," he said, managing a smile. "I'll make out."

The afternoon was well along when a shadow fell across the doorway and Bob looked up from his desk to see Padre Donates standing there, beaming at him.

"Father!" he exclaimed. "Come in! You are my first visitor."

"No, I cannot stay," the aged man replied. "I just wanted to stop and give you my blessing and tell you how proud I am that one of us has been honored with such a responsibility. I am sure it means better days for Wild Horse."

"Don't expect too much," Bob cautioned, moving to the door. "The men who have run this town so long won't give up without a fight. The best I can do is wear them down."

"I have no doubt but what you will succeed, my son. And may I remind you that you are not without friends here? The two of us are only a stone's throw away from each other. If ever you feel you would like to sit down and listen to an old man's chatter, come and see me. My door is always open, Roberto. If you do not care for talk, we can just sit and smoke and dream a little."

"You will be seeing me," Bob assured him. "I should like nothing better than to relax under the trees with you for a quiet hour."

"Come whenever you are of a mind, my son. And now I must be getting back for vespers." Padre Donates murmured a blessing and continued on to the church. Though his step was feeble, there was something indomitable about him.

"I couldn't do better than to take a leaf out of his book," Bob mused aloud. "He's been stoned and spit on, but he stood up to it. I'll be all right if I do half as well."

The shadows were growing long when he took his first stroll up and down the main street. The saloons were open, looking for business that had not yet returned. They were far from deserted, however. But it wasn't only the saloon element that hurried to windows and doorways to stare; even Chris Abeles, the druggist, came out to see him pass.

Though he gave no sign that he was aware of it, he saw a certain amazed, even baffled, look in the eyes of some men, as though they were telling themselves that this couldn't be true—an ex-cowpuncher, with a silver star pinned on his shirt, parading the street as coolly as though he had all the law in the State of New Mexico behind that badge. Like Les Quade, more than one of them said, "He's crazy!" One man stacked up against this town? It was worse than crazy!

Aware of the attention focused on him, Bob turned back before going as far as Antonio's shop. Cap Null was waiting for him when he passed the hotel. From the steps, he said, "I'd like to talk to you."

"About what?" Bob inquired coolly.

Cap motioned for him to come up on the long porch. They had it to themselves.

"The shoe seems to be on the other foot in your case, Maxwell," Cap remarked, indicating a chair. "Considerin' that you didn't miss bein' strung up by more'n a few minutes, two or

three days ago, you've come back purty fast," he added, as they sat down. This was intended to be on the humorous side.

Bob refused to be amused. "Where does it leave you, Null?"

Cap wasn't ready for that. "What do you mean?" he said, with a faint uneasiness.

"You were quick to accuse Doc Morrell of being responsible for that business. Are you beginning to wish you hadn't talked?"

"No! What I said stands! He won't have to hear it from you or no one else; I'll tell him, when he shows up!" Cap glared angrily at his frayed cigar. "You're in position to do somethin' about that deal, Maxwell. Are you goin' after him?"

"Why are you so interested?"

"I don't like people who git in my way. I warned him, but he wouldn't listen. And he ain't the only one." He turned to glance at a man in overalls and frayed Stetson who was entering the hotel bar. "The Arkansaw Kid," Cap muttered. "He ain't been around for weeks.

"As I was goin' to say, Maxwell," he continued, "we had things our own way for a long time; we didn't bother nobody, and nobody bothered us. You never heard of a stage bein' stuck up. There wasn't no rustlin'. Oh, mebbe a man went out and dropped his loop on a steer for a little meat. But it didn't amount to nothin'. About three years ago, things began to change, and they got worse and worse. So now we git a deputy sheriff out here. I know what it means. A few damned fools like Morrell are pullin' the roof down on me."

With a frosty twinkle in his eyes, Bob said, "I hadn't expected to find you taking me as seriously as this."

"You?" Cap jeered. "You don't mean a thing, Maxwell. I expect to see you lyin' dead in the street one of these days. But that won't end it; another man will show up to take your place—and when he drops, there'll be another and another. By that time, the law will have to make good. The county will find the men and the money and do the job up brown."

"If it's all over but the shouting, why bother talking to me?"

Cap regarded him with gimlet-eyed attention. "Maxwell, I give up hard. It's late, but it ain't too late to sidestep a showdown. You want to make good. If these holdups stopped and there wasn't any more rustlin', it would be a feather in your cap. The heat would be off all the way around."

Bob leaned back in his chair. "I begin to get you. You want to make a deal with me."

"Yeh! I want you to go after Morrell—make an example of him. What the hell, Maxwell, you've got your price, same as anybody else. Name it and I'll pay it."

Bob shook his head. "I'm afraid you'd find it too steep. You drag a lot of weight around here; why don't you go after Morrell yourself?"

"That would be easy—but it wouldn't do no good. I want the law to nail him. That'll bring the fools to their senses—guys like this Arkansaw Kid. If you don't want to make it a personal matter, there's other ways."

Bob had heard enough. Getting to his feet, he said, his voice sharp with disgust, "You're talking to the wrong man, Cap. I'm not interested in making any deals. I'll play my own hand with Morrell."

Cap smiled with brazen indifference. "Think it over for a day or two," he

advised. "You may change your mind."

Bob passed Shep Smiley on the sidewalk. They exchanged a curt nod. On reaching the jail, he sat down and spent half an hour mulling over what Cap Null had said. He dismissed the brazenness with which Cap had put his proposition as being in character with what could be expected from him. But he had sounded so sure of himself—as though he had better cards than he was playing and was holding them back for another time.

"He knows what happened at Alamosa, and why I came to Wild Horse," Bob muttered. "It couldn't be anything else."

Chapter Fourteen

Midnight Bluff

LES came in with the horses on the morning of the third day. Bob had had no trouble, but with the town filling up again, he sensed that feeling against him was stiffening. Not wanting to endanger Pia by his repeated presence had kept him from seeing her as often as he would have liked.

"You still look healthy," Les observed with a crooked grin, as they led the broncs back to the renovated shed. "They gittin' used to seein' you around?"

"I'm afraid not. They've got over their surprise; that's about all."

"They're all back, I reckon."

"Most of them. There's a dozen or more camped out at the Whisky Ranch. I rode out last evening and looked them over."

"What about Doc Morrell?"

"He's out there. I expect he'll be in town before the day is over. I'm anxious to see how he makes out."

"With you?"

"With Cap Null. You heard what Cap had to say to Matt."

"I sure did! He'd have had us believe he was throwin' Morrell to the wolves. You don't mean to tell me you think it was on the level?"

"I don't know," Bob declared. "I'm waiting to find out."

He was careful not to say anything about his conversation with the proprietor of the Barrett House. In the last two days, he had passed the hotel a score of times. Cap always seemed to be on the veranda, where he would be easy to find. Bob knew it wasn't by accident.

He and Les went inside, and after they had talked for a few minutes, he asked, "Are you in any hurry to head for the ranch?"

"If I pull out this afternoon it'll be okay. Why?"

"I want you to do something for me. If Morrell is going to show up today, he'll be riding in pretty soon. You go down to the hotel. Hang around for an hour. If you see him making for the Barrett House bar, follow him in and keep your ears open. Keep away from the whisky; there's a roulette wheel in there. Buy a few chips—"

"I'm light, Maxwell," Les interrupted. "I got six bits for somethin' to eat and that's all."

"I'll stake you," Bob told him. "When you get back, I'll take you over where I'm getting my meals and treat you to dinner. I figure Cap and Morrell may have a run-in. I want to know what they say."

"Okay!" Les agreed. "Let's have the dough."

Les had been watching the hotel for no more than half an hour when he saw Morrell jog up the street and tether his bronc across the way. Four men were loitering on the sidewalk. Doc gave them a nod. They returned it and shouldered their way into the barroom at once. He seemed to wait a few moments, as though giving them time to get set, before he swaggered in after them.

The exchange of nods had not escaped Les. Shoving across the street quickly, he walked into the saloon a few steps behind Doc. Continuing on to the wheel, he bought a stack of white chips and made a bet.

The little black ball was still bouncing over the numbers when Cap Null stalked through the door that opened on the hotel office, his rocky face as chilling as a December sky.

The bartender had set out glasses and a bottle. As Doc was about to reach for the bottle, Cap's fingers closed on it and slid it out of reach.

"What's the idea?" Morrell demanded, pretending to be surprised. The four men lined up with him edged apart just enough to give themselves gun room and then froze there in spurious inattention.

"You've bought your last drink in here, Doc," said Cap. "You crossed me once too often when you got Smiley to arrest Maxwell, so you could lead a mob up to the jail and take him out and string him up. I told you Matt Garner was organizing, but you went right ahead—doin' your damnedest to have all of us run out of Wild Horse."

Cap knew how to rattle the windows with the thunder of his wrath. He wasn't thundering now; he was keeping his voice down, and its effect was more devastating than all the noise he might have made.

"Now, thanks to you, we've got Maxwell back here wearin' a sheriff's star," he went on. "I'm through with you, Doc. You make another move and I'll stop you."

"You will, eh?" Morrell's derisive laugh bounced around the barroom. "You're talkin' high and mighty, Cap, but you're all washed up in Wild Horse. The boys know how you blabbed to Garner. They figger you'll blab on them, when the time comes. They got no use for a snitch."

It jarred Cap. Morrell had never stood up to him before, and he couldn't quite believe it now. Les expected him to go for his gun, but Cap held the man so cheaply that he felt he could afford to stick to his scheming and gain the advantage of having Deputy Sheriff Maxwell give Doc his comeuppance.

"So I'm on the shelf," he declared, with cutting sarcasm. "Have it your way, Doc; before I'm through I'll show you who's runnin' this town. As of now, I still own this joint, and I don't want your business. Is that plain enough?"

"You couldn't have my business if you wanted it," Morrell retorted. "I just dropped in to let you know where you stand with me."

When he started out, with his men following him, Les cashed in his checks and slipped out through the hotel office. He was reporting to Bob a few minutes later.

"I don't know what you make of it," Les declared, as Bob sat thinking it over, "but I didn't figger Cap Null would take that sort of gab from Doc Morrell. Don't git the idea that it was a case of five to one; he had a bartender, Spinney, at the wheel, and

Dave Coleman, one of his dealers, in the back of the room. There's somethin' there that don't meet the eye."

Bob found it a shrewd observation. "They weren't sounding off for your benefit, Les?"

"No! It was on the level. Morrell saw me. I don't know whether Cap did or not. But neither one of them knew I was goin' to pop in. The four lugs Morrell had with him were all set for trouble."

"Did you know them?"

"I've seen 'em before. One of 'em, a buck-toothed gent about my size, calls himself the Arkansaw Kid. He's a killer; got six, seven notches on his gun. I tell you, Maxwell, if you're smart, you'll run Morrell out of town, and quick."

Bob said no. "I want him to stick around, so I can keep an eye on him. I'll lock up, and we'll go to dinner."

Les had been gone for hours when Bob strolled past the hotel and found Cap Null on the porch. Leaning over the rail, Cap said, with attempted pleasantness, "You're tryin' my patience, Maxwell. You don't want to take too long about changin' your mind."

Matching his tone, Bob said, "That was all decided the other day. I told you I wasn't interested in any deals."

"Um-m, so you did," Cap acknowledged, addressing his cigar. Suddenly sober, he said, "I'm lookin' at a strange situation, Maxwell. If things go your way, there won't be anythin' left for me to do but pull up stakes and find me a new town. On the other hand—and this is the laugh—I can't afford to have anythin' happen to you."

"I reckon I can consider that a lucky break," Bob said simply.

"Use your own judgment about that." Cap got up to go inside. "I understand your friend Quade was in the bar this mornin' when Doc was blowin' off. I'm glad you heard all about it. I took considerable from that rat. But only because I'm stickin' to what I told you the other day; I'm leavin' him for you to git, Maxwell."

It was late at night when Pia's father banged on Bob's door and asked to be admitted at once. Not knowing whether the little man was alone or not, Bob paused to pull on his pants before opening up.

"What is it?" he asked, seeing that Antonio was by himself, afraid that something had happened to Pia.

"Roberto, they are going to make a demonstration against you tonight. Pepe Alvarez brought word to me only a few minutes ago. He lives beyond Rawhide Gulch. They took his mule Josefina and armfuls of straw. They are going to make an effigy of you, tie it on the mule, and parade up and down the street."

"If that's all, it's nothing to get excited about," said Bob. The little man would not have it that way.

"You don't understand, Roberto! They are drunk—between thirty and forty of them! They'll dare you to interfere!"

"Whether I try to break it up or not depends on what they do," Bob observed. "Whose idea is it?"

"The Arkansaw Kid took Pepe's mule."

That morning, in the Barrett House bar, the Kid had been ready to abet Morrell. It seemed reasonable to couple them together now. He said as much, adding, "Doc may keep in the background, but you can be sure this

is something he dreamed up."

Antonio offered to remain at the jail, for what help he might be. Bob said no. "I want you to get home and stay there. This thing is aimed at me, so I don't believe Pia and the boy are in any danger, but I want you to be with them."

When Sandoval left, Bob snuffed out the light, slipped into his clothes; and settled down to wait.

It was nearing midnight before he heard the rioters coming. As they moved out of the Gulch some of the men broke off clumps of dead sage and lit them. Yelling, waving their impromptu torches and making the night hideous with their obscenities, they poured over the hill into the main street. Out from the saloons came a whisky-brave crew to cheer them on and provide reinforcements.

The Arkansaw Kid, foolish with liquor, led the parade in a weaving snake dance. Behind him came Pepe Alvarez's mule, so unwilling a participant in this midnight revelry that it required the combined effort of half a dozen men to keep it moving in the right direction. Strapped on the mule's back, riding backward, was a straw likeness of the deputy sheriff. Fastened to the head of this man of straw was a flat-brimmed Stetson, such as Bob wore. A placard hung from its neck, bearing the words GREASER MAXWELL.

Bob kicked the door open as the procession neared. The flares had burned out, but the moonlight was bright enough for the rioters to see him sitting there, his sawed-off shotgun resting on his knees. The crowd yipped and howled and showered him with insulting taunts.

He took it and said nothing. The paraders straggled past. If Doc Morrell was among them, Bob failed to locate him. As he expected, the gang turned at the churchyard and came back. Whipping out their guns, they not only blasted the straw man to bits but killed the mule in their drunken clumsiness.

The demonstrators had amused themselves, but they had not accomplished their real purpose, which was to bait the deputy sheriff into attempting to interfere with their antics and thereby make him look cheap and ridiculous. That he could do anything, with the odds fifty to one against him, seemed altogether unlikely.

Bob realized he was playing for high stakes tonight; that if he hoped to go on, he had to come through without losing face. If he did, the threats and abuse that had been hurled at him would be meaningless, as would the whole episode.

The crowd whooped it up for a few minutes and then began to disintegrate. A score remained, the Arkansaw Kid one of them. Egged on by the others, he shuffled toward the door, his legs unsteady under him.

"That's far enough," Bob said quietly. "Take another step and I'll kill you."

The Kid wasn't so drunk but what he could understand that sort of talk. The unruffled intensity behind it made an even deeper impression on his fuzzy senses.

The group of men in the middle of the street had heard. They stiffened, but they remained where they were, and so did the Kid.

"Yuh don't scare me, Maxwell!" he bragged. "No greaser is tellin' us where to head in!"

"I'm telling you—and now," Bob said, his tone level and inexorable.

"You boys have had your fun. It's over. I'll give you thirty seconds to get out of the range of my gun."

His attention was not focused solely on the Kid; out in the road, he saw a man or two pull away. The others started to bunch up and growl defiantly. The next moment, they began to waver. One of them called, "Come on! There'll be another time, Kid!"

The latter needed no further persuasion.

Bob smiled thinly to himself as he watched them go. When the street was empty, he went out and removed the placard from the dead mule. His first impulse was to tear it to pieces. Instead, he brought it inside and hung it on the wall.

"No, Pia, we will not leave the house," Antonio Sandoval repeated for the third or fourth time. "Roberto was very emphatic about it; we were to remain here."

"But all that shooting!" she cried. "I must know if he is safe—or—"

"Is that the measure of your confidence in him?" her father inquired reprovingly. "I have no doubt at all that he came through safely. There was much shooting, but I did not hear his big gun. If there had been a fight, he would have fired at least one shot. You will have to contain yourself, Pia. Roberto will let you know how he fared."

He sat down to smoke. Pia remained at the window. Sleep for either was out of the question. But time dragged on and Antonio was dozing off in his chair when her sharp cry roused him and took him to the window.

"There!" he exclaimed happily. "It's just as I told you; he is all right!"

With the double purpose in mind of relieving Pia regarding his safety and showing Wild Horse that he had not been cowed, Bob had stepped out into the middle of the street and proceeded down its length, his shotgun resting lightly in the crook of his left arm.

Late as it was, he attracted attention with every step he took. But there was none of the raucous jeering that had greeted him earlier in the night.

He saw Pia at the window soon after he passed the blacksmith's shop. She was so nervous that she had trouble opening it and her father had to help her.

"It didn't amount to anything," he said, through the iron grille. "But I thought you might be worried."

"Worried?" she gasped. "I said my beads so often I lost count. You will come in for a moment?"

"No, it's very late," he told her. He tarried for a word with Antonio.

"And you say no one was killed, with all that shooting?" the little man asked incredulously.

"No one but the straw man and your friend Pepe Alvarez's gray mule."

"Better a hundred times that one of those thugs had died rather than poor old Josefina!" The little saddlemaker shook his head regretfully. "Pepe loved that mule!"

Chapter Fifteen

Shotgun and Shackles

THEIR mental equipment being what it was, it had not taken the Arkansaw Kid and a score of his followers long to deceive themselves into believing that the night had gone their way, and they returned to the Gulch to celebrate.

Doc Morrell was waiting for them when they trooped into Queenie Anderson's dive. He had witnessed the demonstration from a safe distance and knew it had been a dismal failure.

"Shut up!" he barked, when the Kid started to give him his version of what had happened. "Don't hand that line to me! You guys ain't got nothin' to celebrate. Maxwell bluffed you out—made monkeys of you!"

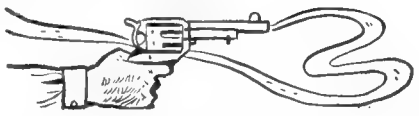
The Kid tried to protest, but Doc refused to listen. Utterly disgusted, he found his horse and left for the Whisky Ranch. His going dampened no one's spirits. "To hell with him!" the Kid snarled. That was the feeling of all.

The Arkansaw Kid was fresh from the robbery of a Colorado bank and plentifully supplied with funds. Nothing else was required for an all-night carouse. At daylight, he was still going strong. Crazy-drunk, he announced that he was going to shoot up the town. Word of his intention was brought upstairs to Queenie. She lumbered into the barroom. Pushing men out of the way, she confronted the Kid, but he wouldn't listen even to her.

"Some of you boys stop the fool!" she cried. "Stop him before he makes trouble for all of us!"

The Kid had borrowed a gun to supplement his own. With a .45 in each hand, he invited anyone who was so minded to try to stop him. Thus challenged, his late friends found it the better part of wisdom to mind their own business. The Kid backed out unopposed and lurched up the street and over the ridge into Wild Horse.

Bob was returning from breakfast when he heard shooting in the vicinity of the hotel. Pausing only long enough to snatch up his riot gun, he hurried that way. He had got only as far as



Pike's, when he saw the Kid, out in the middle of the road, howling like a wolf and amusing himself no end by shooting out the store windows.

Businessmen were just opening up for the day. Chris Abeles, the druggist, and his wife, had come down from their rooms above the shop. When the Kid shattered the corner window, Mrs. Abeles ran out to plead with him to spare the other one. Deliberately, he turned his guns on her and killed her as she stood on the drugstore step.

Chris, a mild-mannered, bespectacled German, rushed to his wife's side. A glance told him there was nothing he could do for her. Beside himself, he dashed at the Kid, his clenched fists his only weapon.

The Kid leveled at him. Bob, running up, expected to see Abeles cut down, but the Kid's .45s were empty and the hammers clicked harmlessly.

Bob was on top of him then, clubbing him with the double barrel of his gun. The Kid crumpled up and, with all the fight knocked out of him, was handcuffed without offering any resistance.

From Pike's and the other stores, merchants and clerks rushed up, some to try to console Abeles, while several carried the druggist's wife inside. Shep Smiley, who boasted that he was responsible for the peace of Wild Horse, failed to put in an appearance.

Jesse Pike was among those who gathered about Bob and the Arkansaw Kid. "It was uncalled for, Maxwell," the usually phlegmatic Pike declared. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to haul this man in front of the judge and charge him with murder."

It was received with a discouraging shaking of heads. A man said, "You won't get far with that." Another expressed an even more pessimistic opinion: "Ben East won't hear the case."

"He will if you men have got backbone enough to stand behind me," Bob declared bluntly. "Pike is the only one who has offered me any support; the rest of you have been sitting on the fence. This senseless killing should bring home a few things. Chris's wife just happened to get in the way of this mad dog's guns. It could have been any one of you. He'd have killed you just as readily."

"Of course he would," Jesse Pike agreed. "It ain't no credit to any of us the way we've pulled our necks in and let things go from bad to worse. Sympathy is all right, but for one, I'm not going to tell Chris how sorry I am this happened and let it go at that; I'm ready to do something. I don't expect all of you to line up with Maxwell and me, but those of you who are, raise your hands."

Only two or three held back. The hostile attitude of the others quickly caused them to change their minds and they reluctantly signified their willingness to do their part.

"That's better than I expected," said Jesse. "We'll see whether Ben East is ready to do his duty or not—and I don't mean for him to fine this killer five dollars for a breach of the peace, or bind him over to be held for a higher court."

"No sir!" Jerry Cohane, the Getty and Wadell agent, called out. "To do any good, this matter has got to be settled right here in Wild Horse—and the sooner the better!"

The Arkansaw Kid stirred with regained consciousness. Bob reached down and hauled him to his feet. Without further ado, he dragged him off to the jail and locked him up. Pike and the others were waiting in front of the drugstore. Jesse got Bob aside.

"You know a justice of the peace can't find a prisoner guilty of murder and pass the death sentence on him, Maxwell. If we get Ben to find him guilty, there won't be any difficulty about having the sentence carried out, but it won't be anything better than plain vigilante law."

"As long as there's justice in it, it's a million times better than no law at all," Bob said grimly, thinking of what Childress had told him. "I'm going to see Ben East now. I want to get this over with before the Kid's friends can do anything about it. Will you go over with me?"

"A bunch of us will go. Smiley's inside, blowing off about what he's going to do."

The marshal came out of the drugstore at that moment and accosted Bob. "Strikes me this is a matter for me to handle, Maxwell. The Kid was drunk; he didn't know what he was doin'. When he sobers up, I'll see that he's fined and ordered out of town."

"You'll have to change your mind about that," Bob returned with withering contempt. "The Arkansaw Kid was drunk last night. He was your wolf then, but you were hard to find; he belongs to me now, and I'm pinning his ears back."

"By gravy, yuh'll never git away with it, Maxwell!" Smiley asserted furiously. "Ben East knows who butters his bread! He's got a skinful this mornin'. When he comes out of the

fog, I'll talk to him, and he'll listen!"

"Shep, you better pull in your horns," Jesse Pike advised pointedly. "There's a cleanup coming around here and it could include you. If you're ready, Maxwell, we'll step down to Ben's place."

Smiley would have protested further, but Pike's blunt words and the stern faces of the others jarred him. Giving his suspenders an angry snap, he crossed the street, growling to himself.

They found the judge stretched out in a hammock on his back porch, dead to the world. Jesse shook him without results.

"Full as a tick!" he said.

"Let's take him out to the pump," Jerry Cohane suggested. "We'll sober him up or drown him."

"You all can't treat the jedge that-a-way!" Ben's housekeeper protested.

"Annie, you keep out of this," Pike said. "Make some strong black coffee."

"Mr. Pike, the jedge won't drink it," she answered. "He hates coffee."

"He'll drink some this morning," Bob informed her. "You put a pot on the fire."

They worked over Ben for an hour before he regained his wits. Bob told him what had happened.

"You understand what I'm saying, Ben?"

The judge straightened up a bit in his chair. He was a bedraggled figure, his face bloodless and ghastly looking. Slowly he focused his red eyes on the deputy sheriff. "Course I know what you're saying. It's too bad, Maxwell; Teena Abeles was a good woman. But why're you pestering me? Come back this afternoon."

"No, this afternoon might be too late. You're going to hold court as soon as I can fetch the prisoner over here; and I'm warning you, Ben, not to find him just drunk and disorderly. I'm charging him with murder. The only thing for you to decide is whether he's innocent or guilty."

"But I'm only a justice of the peace, Maxwell! I can't do any—"

"Stop your whining, Ben!" Pike cut him off. "You're the only man resembling a judge we've got in a hundred and fifteen miles. You want to start searching your soul. If there's a spark of manhood left in you, you'll face up to this situation, no matter what it says in the law books. You get the Kid, Maxwell; we'll sit right here and keep an eye on Ben."

Bob left at once. When he reached the main street, the tension gripping Wild Horse struck him as forcibly as though it were a physical thing. The usual number of wagons were in from the ranches, but business was at a standstill. The saloons were filling up, though the hour was still early; proof enough that word of the Kid's arrest had seeped through the Gulch and out to the Whisky Ranch. For the first time, a few men gave him an encouraging word as he passed.

At the jail, he found the Arkansaw Kid sitting up in his cell and using the bucket. Though the Kid was sick, he was sober enough to realize that he was in trouble. Through an alcoholic haze, he recalled shooting up the town and that somewhere a woman had got in his way and he had killed her. How he had reached the jail, he didn't know.

"If you're as tough as you claim to be, let's see you pull yourself together," Bob said, as he unlocked the cell door. "I'm taking you over to face

the judge."

The Kid glared at him venomously. "Where's my goods? I had some dough on me."

"I've got your money and your guns," Bob told him. "I'll turn everything over to Ben."

"To that crook? I can kiss the dough good-by if he gits his fingers on it! That's my money, Maxwell. Hand it over! I'll pay my own fine!"

"Money won't get you out of this jam, Kid," Bob observed thinly. Bending down, he snapped a cuff on the Kid's right wrist and locked the other half around his own left one. "Come on; we're taking a walk."

As they stepped out, shackled together, and Bob saw that the street was thronged with men, he realized that an attempt to take the Kid away from him was a definite possibility. The help Matt and the other cowmen had promised was too far away to serve him now; he had to depend on what support he had in Wild Horse. Convinced that a bold front was his best ally, he marched the Kid past the hotel and the saloons and did not cut through to the judge's house until he reached the blacksmith shop.

He found a small crowd gathered in the yard. Three or four women, friends of Teena Abeles, were there with their husbands. Jesse Pike came out on the porch and said, "Bring him in here, Maxwell."

The parlor of the old house served as the courtroom. It was furnished with several rows of plain benches and a high, old-fashioned desk. Ben sat at the desk now, his face wan and a bewildered look in his eyes.

A chair stood at the side of the desk. Bob put the Kid in it and after removing the shackles, took a seat in the front row, a few feet away. The crowd was coming in. Pike took the seat at Bob's side.

"Did you have any trouble fetching him here?"

"No," said Bob, "but there's a mean-looking gang gathering along the street."

Jesse stroked his beard and nodded phlegmatically. "That was to be expected. If every crook in town turns out, we can't back down now; we've got to go through with what we started. If we do, we can break their grip on Wild Horse. God help us if we don't! Tony Sandoval was here a minute ago. He said he'd be back, with at least a dozen of his Spanish friends. I told him to round up as many as he could. I know the men he's after. They're all right—men with plenty of backbone."

The crowd was moving inside. Ben East blinked in owlish dismay on seeing the women. He was acquainted with all four. The determined look on their faces warned him that they were not there merely to satisfy their curiosity. Instead of finding seats on the benches, they descended on him in a body.

Chapter Sixteen

Rough Justice

MRS. Joe Beecher (her husband operated a small sawmill, up on the Divide, that supplied Wild Horse with firewood and such lumber as it required) proceeded to give Ben a large and scathing piece of her mind.

"Hattie, you shouldn't talk to me like that," he protested weakly. "I

know I drink too much, but—"

"I ain't saying nothing to you, Ben East, that the good women of this town ain't been saying for years! You've turned your back on everything that's decent—protecting these outlaws and taking their dirty money! Don't you attempt to protect this miserable little rat who killed Teena Abeles!"

"It was cold-blooded murder," another exclaimed in a tone that made Ben wince. "We're here to see that you do your duty and find him guilty."

The Arkansaw Kid shifted about uneasily in his chair as they continued their harangue. Though his eyes remained flinty and his sneering grimace settled deeper on his face, his secret anxiety was hardly eased when he saw Antonio Sandoval and almost a score of Spanish-Americans, all armed, push into the already crowded room and take up a position at the rear.

The Kid had been in and out of Wild Horse for years. He thought he knew the town and what to expect. But here were businessmen, women, even "greasers," joined together, ready to vent their vengeance on him and his kind. It had never happened before. No one had ever bothered about them in the past. What had aroused them?

The Kid had only to glance at the man with the silver star pinned on his shirt to find the answer. Single-handed, backed up by his own example, Bob Maxwell had stiffened men's spines and fired them with the will to fight.

The judge was banging his gavel when Doc Morrell and half a dozen hastily recruited toughs appeared at the door. They stood there, a wave of hostility breaking against them. Their presence seemed to cost Ben what little courage he had been able to muster. He had been at the point of casting all personal considerations aside and striking a blow for what he knew was law and order, however arrived at. Now he was all at sea again, as fearful of the wrath of one faction as the other. The element Morrell represented had owned him body and soul and he had done its bidding for years, but in his more sober moments he despised the men who had bought him and held him in undisguised contempt.

In his dilemma, he glanced at Maxwell and found something in the cold depths of the man's dark eyes that tightened his mouth and took some of the slack out of his sagging cheeks. Banging his gavel again, he said with unexpected firmness, "This court's now in session. In the matter of the People of Mescalero County versus the Arkansaw Kid, an alias, true name unknown, charged with the wilful slaying of Mrs. Teena Abeles, I recognize Deputy Sheriff Maxwell. State your case!"

The Kid was not consulted as to whether he wanted a jury or anyone to represent him. It was courtroom procedure the like of which had seldom been seen even in frontier New Mexico. Bob got to his feet and gave an eye-witness account of the slaying of the druggist's wife. When he finished, the judge glared down at the prisoner and asked him if he had anything to say.

"Don't you try to stare me down, you old whisky soak!" the Kid blazed. "I've looked better men than you in the eye! You're fixin' to find me guilty, and you got no law for it!"

If anything had been needed to end Ben East's wavering and galvanize him into a judicial ogre, that did it. Shaking his fist at the Kid, he shouted, "I have the law of God and man to

condemn you! The law of the gun has been your law! You have left a red wake behind you—murder and robbery! You tried this innocent woman —condemned her to death and executed her with a six-gun; it is only justice that your miserable life should be snuffed out of you at the end of a rope! Sheriff, take this mad dog away and execute the will of this court on him at once!"

The crowd sat stunned for a moment. Not only had the end come quickly, but instead of the expected equivocation, Ben had "thrown the book" at the Kid, as the old saying had it. It took Doc Morrell and his companions as much by surprise as anyone else. If they had hoped to stage a demonstration, it was nipped in the bud, for by the time they recovered their wits, they found themselves covered by the guns of Antonio Sandoval and his friends.

The ridgepole of Gil Peralta's livery barn, equipped with block and tackle, projected over the entrance and was used to hoist hay into the loft. The Kid was led to the barn. One of Getty and Wadell's Concords was run out, and with hands tied behind his back, he was hoisted to the roof of the coach and made to stand. The hay rope was lowered and a noose placed about his neck.

Across the way, the criminal element and denizens of Rawhide Gulch, male and female, led by Morrell, surged out into the street, bellowing their rage and brandishing guns.

It was the moment Bob had feared. He knew he could count on Antonio and his friends and Jesse Pike. He wasn't so sure about the others.

"The middle of the road is the deadline!" he heard a familiar voice ring out above the pandemonium. "If you folks want wholesale slaughter here, you can have it!"

It was Matt Garner. Les was with him. Uninformed as to what was happening, they had reached Wild Horse only a few minutes ago. Matt's presence made a difference. He had led one raid on the town. His opportune arrival now indicated to many of Morrell's cohorts that Maxwell had got word to him and that a little army of cowboys and stockmen was either on the way or already had Wild Horse surrounded. Even Doc refused to believe that the old man and Quade were there by accident.

Bob realized that, whatever was to follow, the old man had given him a precious minute or two. Men were lined up at the pole of the stage, ready to jerk it out from under the Kid. The latter's face was ashen, but he didn't whimper as Bob gave the word and he had no choice but to step off into thin air.

The five-foot drop broke the Kid's neck. There were no contortions; death was as instantaneous as death ever can be.

Now that the grisly business was over, the crowd stilled its clamor. Jesse Pike said quietly, "This had to be done, Maxwell. It marks a milestone in your fight against lawlessness. I'm glad I had a part in it."

Bob accepted it without comment; he knew he wasn't safely over this hurdle until he had cleared the street. To do it at all, it had to be done quickly, before Morrell's gang got its second wind. He glanced at the lifeless body of the Kid. It had been his intention to leave it hanging there for several hours for its moral effect. It occurred

to him now that to cut the rope in dramatic fashion with a slug from his .45 would carry far more persuasion.

The rope was barely swaying. Fully aware that he would be inviting disaster if he failed, he raised his .45 and fired. The rope unraveled as the bullet sliced through it and one strand that had not been completely severed parted under the weight that was on it.

It was showmanship, but of a kind that called for ice-cold nerves, as well as of a nature that Doc and the other blacklegs could appreciate. Nothing Bob might have done would have made a deeper impression on them. Proceeding to the middle of the street and ignoring Morrell, he said softly and carefully:

"Break it up. I want this street clèared and kept clear. You'll find the Kid at the undertaker's if you want to save the county the expense of burying him."

There were enough of them—all hardened men who, off the record, had often burned powder—to have run roughshod over Maxwell's thin forces. They were of a mind to try; but they held back. Matt's unexpected appearance had something to do with it. Outweighing it by far was their unacknowledged respect for the tall man who wore the silver star. They could sneer at him, revile him, call him greaser, but they weren't ready for showdown—not on his terms, at least. Sullenly, they began to disperse, some to crowd into the main-street saloons, the rest to go back over the ridge into the Gulch.

Bob found Les Quade confronting him.

"Hell of a fine mess you got into!" the little puncher growled indignantly. "Why didn't you git word to us? You had time enough; this ruckus started last night."

Some of the sternness left Bob's mouth and with a thin smile, he said, "I thought I could handle it, Les."

Matt overheard it as he joined them. He greeted Bob warmly. "Things turned out better for you this way than if you'd sent for us. You've found some support right here in town, where you need it most."

"It was more than I had any reason to expect," Bob declared. "I don't know whether it would have been enough or not. You showed up at the right time. It definitely turned the tide; that bunch seemed to think you might have the rest of the crew and no telling how many more just around the corner. If you're going to be in town an hour or two, I'll see you later."

"I'll be in Jesse's," Matt replied.

Bob looked for Antonio and found him with Peralta and a group of Spanish-Americans, gathered in the barn. Someone had thrown a tarp over the still figure of the Arkansaw Kid.

"I want to thank every one of you," Bob told them. "When Pike gave me your message, Antonio, my blood warmed with pride. For years it has been the way of our people to turn the other cheek and do nothing even when our rights were being taken from us. Not because we lacked the courage to fight. We wanted to avoid trouble—that was our excuse. It was a mistake; submit often enough to such treatment and men are bound to regard it as weakness and inferiority. When you walked into the courtroom with your guns, I wanted to yell 'Hurrah'! I knew these *picaros* were going to be handed a surprise. You saw how they acted. They couldn't believe their eyes."

"They're still strong," Gil Peralta said. "I don't fear them, but they may try to get even with us."

"Don't walk wide of them," Bob advised. "Show them the same strong front you did this morning. Strength is the only thing that crowd respects."

His business with the undertaker finished, Bob returned to the jail and sat down and wrote Buck at length. Wanting the letter to go east on the noon stage, he carried it to the office and had Cohane hand it to the driver.

Going on to Pike's, Bob found Les perched outside on a flour barrel, waiting for him.

"The old man's inside, with Jesse," Les said, with a sharp, interested glance. "He's leavin' me behind when he pulls out for Las Animas with his beef, a week from tomorrow."

"So?" Bob said. "Why?"

"I wanted it that way. You got away with somethin' this morning, Maxwell, but you ain't kiddin' yourself; you know the big showdown is still to come. I figgered there'd better be somebody left around who could scrape the bottom of the barrel and git a few men together in a hurry if and when you needed 'em."

"How long does the old man expect to be gone?" Bob inquired.

"Nine days. Taylor will be the first to pull out. 7-11 will be a day behind him. Diamond and a Half will go next, and so on. There'd be a pile-up in Las Animas if they tried to move any faster."

"I get what you're driving at," said Bob. "The last outfit to go will be on the road a couple days before the first one gets back."

"That's the rub, Maxwell." Les slipped down from the barrel and took up a notch in his belt. "Your wolves will do their damnedest to pull you down when they see there's only a handful of us left in the hills."

"You're a cheerful pup," Bob remarked banteringly. His mouth pressed together then, and he said, "Maybe they won't wait that long, Les."

"By God, you'll be lucky if they don't!" was the little puncher's flinty answer.

Chapter Seventeen

Ambuscade

THAT night someone tossed a rock through one of Ben East's windows. The news was brought to Bob at once. He watched the house for an hour, but there was no further violence.

The next day and the one that followed passed without incident and, on the surface, Wild Horse seemed to return to normal. In the afternoon of the third day, he spent a peaceful hour with Padre Donates. The walled yard seemed to turn back the passions and violence that beset the town.

The aged priest mentioned Pia. With a directness that was without offense, he said, "You are in love with her, my son, and she with you; but you have not asked for her hand in marriage."

"Not yet, Father. I feel I haven't the right to ask for her now—not knowing what tomorrow may bring. I can speak frankly to you; you know the uncertainty that faces me."

Padre Donates nodded wisely. "You are right, and you are unselfish, Roberto. For a young woman to lose the man she loves is bad enough. It is

worse when he is her husband. But we grow too serious. As I have told you before, I am confident you will accomplish your mission and come to no harm."

Antonio Sandoval and Gil Peralta found them together under the plum trees. For years it had been Antonio's custom to gather a group of his friends —often as many as a dozen—and make the long trip across the Las Animas Plains to Magdalena, for the annual rodeo. It provided a topic of lively discussion for months following, not to mention the weeks of eager anticipation preceding the event. In addition, Antonio had always found it a profitable excursion, and it was not unusual for him to return with orders enough to keep him busy for weeks.

He was reluctant to forego the trip this year. Three days ago, Gil and he had agreed that, with conditions what they were in Wild Horse, leaving was out of the question. Now that a measure of peace had returned to town, they had begun to reconsider and had decided to put the question up to Maxwell.

"We'd be gone two days, Roberto," the little man pointed out. "We'd have to leave about daylight tomorrow; it would be late the next night before we got back. We wouldn't think of going if you feel you might need us here in town."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't go," Bob told them. "Things are quiet enough now. It's my opinion that it'll be four or five days before they get rough again."

He said nothing about the beef herds that would soon be moving toward Las Animas, leaving the range stripped of men, but his opinion was based on that fact.

"Then we'll go," Peralta said, with a broad grin. "Too bad you can't go with us, Maxwell. We'll have a good time."

"That I can believe," Padre Donates observed dryly, "unless they run out of brandy in Magdalena."

"Father, we are going up to see the contests," Gil protested virtuously.

The good man nodded and kept a straight face. "I have heard about the contests. Some of them, I understand, do not take place in the arena. But have your fun and keep it as innocent as you can. As for you, Antonio, you are leaving Piadosa and little Sixto in good hands." Giving Bob a knowing smile, he said, "I know they will be well looked after."

The merrymakers were on their way before Bob awoke. After breakfast he saw Pia for a few minutes.

"I'm so glad Father could go," she told him. "He had been looking forward to it for weeks. I am to keep the shop closed until he returns."

"Be sure you keep the door locked. Will it be necessary for you to go to the store or visit anyone?"

"No, I have things in the house. I was going to go across town and spend an hour with Ramon Benavides' grandmother—she is so old and poorly. It can wait until later in the week. But I must go to the river this morning. I'll take Sixto. He can help me with the wash basket." She paused. "That should be safe enough—there are always so many of us."

"I don't know why not," he agreed.

It was not yet nine o'clock when a man rode up to the jail on a jaded bronc and called Bob out. The rider carried his left arm in a sling and the arm itself was encased in a blood-stained bandage. He said he was Jack Queen, one of Orv Pickett's riders. According to his story, Pickett and part of his crew had jumped three rustlers during the night and had them cornered on the rimrock above Copper Canyon.

"The boss sent me in to git yuh and have the doctor dig the slug outa my arm," the puncher explained. "Yuh ain't acquainted with the country up that way, be yuh?"

"No," Bob had to admit.

"That's what Orv figgered. Go to the house; he'll have somebody waitin' there to show yuh the way. I'm gittin' over to the doctor's."

Rustlers cornered, and a stockman as prominent as Pickett sending for the sheriff!

"It's a beginning," Bob said to himself, with no little satisfaction, as he tossed a saddle on a horse. "Looks like the law has arrived in this country."

When he was ready to ride, he found himself in the embarrassing position of not knowing how to reach Orv Pickett's P in a Circle ranch. Going as far as Pike's, he was about to get down, when Johnnie Landers, Les Quade's friend, came out of the store. Bob called him over and told him the news Pickett's puncher had brought in.

"It's a long ride up there—two hours and better," said Johnnie. "I'll get my bronc and go with you. Who did Orv send in?"

"Jack Queen."

Johnnie nodded. "I know him by sight. A redheaded gent."

Unaware that they were being watched, they left Wild Horse and struck off along a dim road that carried them in the direction of the Divide.

The morning was almost gone when they reached the P in a Circle house. To their surprise they found three or four men in the yard. Pickett, himself, was one of them.

"I can't understand it," Orv said, when Bob had explained why Johnnie and he were there. "We haven't seen any rustlers. We haven't got any stuff in Copper Canyon; we're makin' our gather. Got everythin' down here on the bench. Who'd that gent that said I'd sent him in claim he was?"

"Jack Queen."

"No!" Orv turned and yelled, "Jack! Come here!"

It took the man a minute or two to come up from the lower end of the yard.

"This is Jack Queen," Orv said. "Is he the man, Maxwell?"

"No—"

"Then you been hoaxed."

"I certainly have," was Bob's bitter admission. "It was a smooth trick, and I fell for it. I've given them a good laugh at my expense. If that's all there is to it, I can stand it. Chances are they got me out of town for a purpose. I won't lose any time getting back!"

Pia found the usual chattering, gossiping group of women, young and old, at the river. A short distance away, the children were splashing about in noisy play. Sixto pleaded to be allowed to join them. She gave him her permission. Clad only in a chemise, she carried her basket to a flat rock in midstream and began to do her washing.

When she had finished washing and

laid the clothes out to dry, she and several other girls sought to amuse themselves by paddling about in a deep pool. The water was too cold to be enjoyable and after a few minutes they waded ashore, only to find that they had an audience. Five men had ridden up to the crossing, from the direction of the Whisky Ranch. Doc Morrell was one of them.

Doc had eyes only for Pia. She was a picture to rock a man's senses as she stood there, her wet chemise clinging revealingly to her young body. She wanted to run when she saw him press his knees into his horse and dash toward her, but she stood there frozen, unable even to cry out in alarm.

The other women looked on tongue-tied as Morrell got an arm around her and drew her up into his embrace. Though she fought him, he ran his hand over her lustfully and crushed his mouth against her lips.

Little Sixto came running and caught up a club. With it he belabored Doc's legs. The horse reared when it was struck accidentally. Doc only laughed and let Pia slip to the ground. Turning, he loped away and rejoined his men. Together, they rode off in the direction of the ranch.

With tears streaming from her eyes Pia dashed out into the river and frantically scrubbed her face and mouth.

"Roberto will kill him for this!" Sixto cried. "I am going to find him, Pia!"

"No!" she gasped. "You will do nothing of the sort, Sixto! Stay where you are. I'll gather up the wash and you will help me carry it home!"

Gil Peralta's wife and several others gathered up the clothes for her and carried the basket to the bank.

"The boy is right, Pia," Mrs. Peralta said firmly. "Roberto Maxwell is a brave and honorable man; he will kill that gringo for taking such liberties with you."

"Morrell is a beast, treating you as though you were one of his fancy women from the Gulch," the sharp-tongued wife of the blacksmith declared indignantly. "If Antonio were here, I know what he would do. Since he isn't, it's your Roberto's duty to avenge this insult. He will kill that man, Pia!"

Others said the same. "He will kill him! He will kill him!" It began to beat in Pia's brain like an angry surf.

"No! No!" she cried desperately. "He must not know. There will be another gun fight; Roberto may be shot down. I won't have it. The insult offered me isn't worth it!"

Emilia Peralta shook her head. "You are young, Pia, or you wouldn't talk such nonsense. You can't keep him from knowing."

The incident with Pia had been planned, its purpose being to infuriate Maxwell so that he would toss caution to the winds and rush out to the Whisky Ranch single-handed to avenge it. Doc had found it interesting on a more personal basis, however.

"When this is all over, that little doll is goin' to get plenty of attention from me," he declared, his eyes bright with lecherous anticipation, as he put the Rio Dolores behind him.

"That little spit kitten shore scratched yore face up," the man at his side remarked.

"That's all right," Doc said, dismissing it as of no consequence. "I like 'em hot and full of fire!"

"Yuh better git that stuff outa yore mind," another growled. "We didn't throw in with yuh to help yuh grab off a dame. We got somethin' else to

think about!"

"Sure," Doc agreed lightly, "but if a little fun goes with it, what's the harm? Everythin' is workin' out just as I said it would. We got Sandoval and the only greasers in town with any fight in them away to Magdalena. Out on the range, every outfit is busy roundin' up its beef. If Maxwell sends for help, it'll be hours comin'. But he won't wait. We made a sucker out of him, sendin' him off chasin' rustlers this mornin'. When he gets back and hears that his girl has been mussed up, he'll come gunnin' for me in a hurry."

Morrell expressed his satisfaction with an evil laugh. After weeks of trying he had succeeded in making himself the leader of his kind. Needing someone about whom to rally, they had reluctantly turned to Doc.

A few minutes after Bob and Johnnie Landers left town, men had begun to gather at the Whisky Ranch. Doc now had a force of better than forty at his command. He disposed them cunningly, sent some up the river and an equal number downstream, with orders to conceal themselves in the river bottom. When Maxwell appeared, they were to close in behind and cut off any possibility of escape.

Doc himself and the four who had accompanied him to the river were to lie out behind the tumbledown wall of the old stone corral and ambush their man as soon as he was within range of their guns. As a further bait, still others gathered out on the flats to the north of the house, the idea being that when Maxwell saw them he would head that way and would have to pass close to the corral to get there.

On reaching the ranch, and knowing they had an hour or two to wait, Doc and his men took their time about concealing their ponies. They found an opening in the willow brakes along the river that suited them. That done, they strolled back to the corral and stretched out behind the wall.

"We're all set," Doc declared confidently. "When we get done with Maxwell, the whole gang of us will ride into Wild Horse. We'll push Jesse Pike and a few others into their holes and take over the town. Who's goin' to stop us?"

Chapter Eighteen

"They're Coming for You!"

MAXWELL and Landers returned to Wild Horse to find it apparently as peaceful as when they left. They stopped at Pike's, however, and Bob questioned him.

"We been busier than usual all morning," said Jesse. "If there's any trouble stirring, I ain't heard about it."

Bob told him of the hoax that had been played on him. Jesse saw no reason to regard it seriously.

"Laugh it off," he advised. "You won't fall for that trick again." The big man began to chuckle. "It didn't go all their way. Shep Smiley left town on the noon stage. He won't be back. You ran him out."

"That makes me feel better," said Bob. He turned to Johnnie. "I won't keep you any longer; I know you're anxious to get home. Tell Moffat I had you ride with me this morning."

"That'll be all right," said Johnnie. "Give me some cheese and crackers, Jesse, and I'll be on my way."

When he left Pike's, Bob rode down

to the Sandovals, an uneasiness in him that he didn't try to explain. Pia flew into his arms. Though she had had several hours in which to get hold of herself, sight of him was too much for her and she could not conceal her agitation.

"There's something wrong," he said anxiously. "What is it, Pia?"

"It's nothing," she insisted. "I'm nervous and upset, that's all. I can't explain it, Roberto. Padre Donates was here an hour ago. He told me you had left town. He didn't know why."

"I was tricked into going to Pickett's ranch. I had the long ride for nothing." He told her how it had happened.

"Then you just got back?"

"A few minutes ago."

She said she would get him something to eat.

"No, I'm not interested in anything to eat," he said, refusing to let her go. "I want to know what's wrong, Pia."

"Please!" she pleaded in desperation. "The trouble is with me, Roberto! I can't go on like this—living from day to day—never knowing when you leave me whether I shall see you alive again—a prisoner in this house—unable even to go to the store! If you would only leave this country! I will come to you, no matter where, my darling!"

"You know I can't leave," he said, after he had quieted her. "I've never told you why Luis and I came here. You've heard your father speak of our brother Tom. Tom was killed at Alamosa several months ago. He was the express agent there. I was foreman of the Double R, east of Las Animas; Luis had a good job at Blue Mesa. We decided it was our business to throw up our jobs and go after the man who shot Tom. We knew Wild Horse was the place to look for him."

"And you've found him?" she asked, her throat dry.

"I'm reasonably sure of it, but I haven't evidence enough to satisfy me. When Childress offered to appoint me deputy sheriff, I took the job with the understanding that it wouldn't tie my hands. Both Tom and Luis were gone by then. I figured it was up to me to square things, so I said yes. I've got to stay with it, Pia. You must understand that."

She nodded and did not trust herself to speak.

"I know how hard things are for you," he continued. "They won't always be like this. One of these days Wild Horse will be a different sort of a place—maybe just the little cow town it used to be. When my job is finished, I'm going back to 7-11. Matt Garner and I get along well together. He's offered me a piece of his spread. That means I'll be done with working for wages. It's something for us to look forward to together, Pia." He pressed his cheek against hers tenderly. "You get hold of yourself now; I'll walk down this evening."

Cap Null stood on the Barrett House steps. When he saw Bob coming, he walked to the edge of the sidewalk and stopped him. "I saw you ride by a few minutes ago, but you got past before I could get your attention. Put up your horse and follow me inside; I'm goin' to put it on the line for you."

Not understanding him, Bob said, "I thought you'd given up on me."

"I've given up on you and I've given up on Wild Horse," was Cap's stony answer. "What happens around here after tomorrow won't interest me; I'm packin' up what I want to take and gettin' ready to head for Arizona. I

don't imagine you'll be around to see me go. But we better not stand here gabbin'; you're runnin' out of time, Maxwell!"

He led the way upstairs to his quarters. Several packing-boxes had been moved into his rooms and were half-filled already. There were other signs of departure.

Through the windows on the north side the Rio Dolores and the country beyond, in the direction of the Whisky Ranch, could be seen. Cap studied the view for a moment, and with careful attention. Standing at a window, he said:

"I didn't play my cards right with you, Maxwell. That first day I talked to you and you told me you wasn't makin' any deals—that's when I shoulda done my talkin'. If I had, mebbe I wouldn't be pullin' out tomorrow. But what the hell! You make a few dollars and figure you're sittin' purty, and then some sap comes along and kicks over the apple-cart! But at least I won't be leavin' broke."

Bob had taken a seat on a box. "You didn't bring me up here to tell me your troubles," he remarked, watching Cap closely. "We've been over all that."

"Yeh," Cap agreed. "My troubles started long before you showed up, and you got little to do with 'em; you just happen to be the first man to wear that star. There'll be others. I reckon you've figgered out, Maxwell, that I know why you and Luis hit this country."

"I was sure of that," said Bob. "I've expected for some time that you'd get around to telling me that Morrell was responsible for the Alamosa robbery. He had Billy Dexter and Ike Legrand with him. From the few scraps of evidence Tom left, it was Doc Morrell who killed him."

"Then what was you waitin' for?" Cap burst out savagely. "Did you have to have it in black and white?"

"I wanted to be positive I was right."

Cap shook his head in his bitterness. "That's the trouble with a decent gent like you; you lean over backwards to be fair even when you're dealin' with a rat! Morrell killed your brother. He's never admitted it to me, but I got it straight from Dex."

"Dex?"

"Billy Dexter."

Understanding flashed through Maxwell. It wasn't "Tex" that Wash Priddy had heard someone call out that night at Drip Springs. His mistake was an understandable one—the names were so much alike.

Cap had gotten to his feet. "If you need proof, I'll show you some."

He went to his safe and pulled out a drawer. Among other things, it contained a gold watch.

"Do you recognize this?" Cap asked, handing the watch to Bob, who had but to open the case to find the mark Tom had put on it.

"It's the watch Wells, Fargo gave my brother. The presentation inscription has been milled off, but Tom cut this little notch in the cover—here above the hinge. I recognize the chain, too." Bob's face was as rocky as Cap's when he looked up.

"If you want to know how it came into my hands—read what it says on the tag," the latter volunteered.

"*One hundred dollars to Doc—*"

"Yeh. He went broke one night. I let him have a hundred on the watch. He never redeemed it. Take it! It might have made some difference if I'd given it to you a week, ten days

ago. I figgered I'd give it to you some time. It was to be my big ace." He closed the safe and spun the combination. "I didn't think things would be movin' this fast."

"You knew it belonged to my brother?" Bob asked tonelessly.

"How could I help knowin'? Dex told me Morrell lifted the watch. It ain't important now, Maxwell. You got any idea where you stand?"

"I'm taking it for granted that I can thank Morrell for making a monkey of me this morning—if that's what you mean."

"It's partly what I mean. He didn't get you out of town just to make you look foolish. For once, I'll give him credit; he's played it smart. He could have waited till next week to make his move. Garner and most of the big outfits will be on their way to Las Animas with their beef. But today was good enough for Doc. He knows they're busy—roundin' up stock and gettin' it ready to move. Help will be a long time reachin' you; and on the other hand, he's got Tony Sandoval and his crowd out of town. Who've you got to stand with you? Jesse Pike and a handful of storekeepers?" Cap shook his head at the hopelessness of the prospect. "You won't have a chance!"

There was an unmistakable ring of sincerity in his voice. Though Bob felt it, he said, with pretended carelessness, "You don't have to feel sorry for me, Cap."

"No? Listen to me, Maxwell—you just came up from the Sandovals. Did the girl tell you what happened down at the river this morning?"

"No—"

"I knew it! She's afraid to tell you. Morrell caught her there when the women was washin'. You know they ain't wearin' much. Doc got her up in his arms and gave her a good goin' over."

"Are you telling me the truth?" Bob whipped out, the blood draining out of his face.

"It's a little late for me to be lyin' to you. Doc figgered you'd be so burnt up you'd come gunnin' for him soon as you heard."

"Where is he?" Bob rapped.

"The Whisky Ranch. He's gathered up every idiot in Wild Horse who believes all they got to do is kill you and things will go back the way they was. They're waitin' for you. There won't be any fight; they'll snuff you out on sight."

Cap hauled himself to his feet. Walking to the window, he growled over his shoulder, "I don't expect you to take my advice, but if you'll listen to me, you'll get on your bronc and high-tail it out to 7-11 now. You can be back in town by evenin' with a gang of men and give those birds the showdown they're askin' for."

"I don't like to run," Bob said tightly. "But it's not bad advice." He saw Cap's shoulders stiffen. "What is it?"

"It's too late to do any runnin'! Come here! Look off there beyond the river! They got tired of waitin'; they're comin' for you, Maxwell!"

Bob steeled himself as he saw Morrell and his formidable army of blacklegs approaching the Rio Dolores. He heard Cap saying, "If you had somebody you could send for help, they'd have trouble makin' it. You can be sure Doc's got the roads blocked."

Bob's eyes were hard and bright with the realization that he stood alone. His lips moved. "They'll be here in a few minutes." He was silent then, and the will that was in him pulled

Cap around and they stood facing each other with a vast silence between them.

"Well?" Cap muttered in a breathless sort of way.

"This is something I had never expected to say—I've got to depend on you, Cap. You've got to come through for me. I can barricade myself in the jail and hold that crowd off for a few hours. That'll give you time. You can get away from town after a bit. Go to 7-11. Matt will do the rest."

Cap stared and stared and finally exploded in laughter that bounded off the walls.

"No," he said, and he was enormously sober now. "I ain't your kind, Maxwell. I've lived with thieves and lawless men and bucked the thing you represent so long that there's nothin' noble left in me. You're crazy even askin' me to go."

"I don't think I am," Bob said tensely. "You've got a tough hide, and you play both ends against the middle, but dig deep enough and you'll find a streak of decency. You wanted me to make a deal with you. Well, I'm offering you one."

"I tell you you're crazy!" Cap insisted.

"Then you want Morrell to win hands down—is that it?"

"You know better'n that, Maxwell." A battle went on in Cap. He glanced through the window. Doc and his men were fording the river. It swung him around, his face rockier than Bob had ever seen it.

"All right!" he snarled. "I'll be a sucker and play it your way! Get out of here now. Forget about your bronc. Go down the alley. They'll see your bronc out in front and pull up. I'll stall 'em. It'll give you a minute or two."

Bob stopped at the door and said, "Thanks, Cap. I'll be looking for you about evening."

Chapter Nineteen

Bullets and Banns

AT FIRST glance the flat-roofed adobe jail appeared to be a most unlikely place from which to withstand a determined attack. Bob had lain awake several nights, idly wondering what he could do to defend it in just such an emergency as this. The 'dobe walls offered no protection; slugs from high-powered rifles would make a sieve of them. Stretched out on the floor, a man would be two feet below the surface of the ground and safe enough on that score. But the rear window, barred though it was, would expose him to gunfire from that direction.

The window was small, and it was placed high enough in the wall so that a prisoner could not look out, or anyone on the outside peer in. It wouldn't be too high for a man on horseback. A box would do, or a ladder. How to block off the window quickly, though not necessarily to make it bullet-proof, had baffled him until he hit on the idea of ripping the bunks out of the two cells and standing them on end against the window, in the narrow space between the wall and the rear of the cells. A chair or stool could be broken up and the pieces used to wedge the bunks in place.

It was the first thing he did now. Shutting off light from the rear, he realized, would be a further advantage. Turning over the old desk, he dragged

it across the floor and covered it with straw mattresses and blankets to avoid flying splinters. The room had no partitions, so when he got down behind the hurriedly arranged barricade, he was seven to eight feet back from the door. With the sawed-off shotgun in his hand and his rifle and .45 beside him, he was as ready as he ever would be.

The front window was dangerous, but it too was high, and he was facing it. A man would have to get close to angle a shot through it. He felt he could take care of that; he knew it was through the door that they would try to get at him. He had left it closed but purposely unbolted.

There were shots down the street now, fired, possibly, to overawe Jesse and the few who might have rallied around him. If they weren't penned up in their stores already, they soon would be. It was beyond reason to expect any help from them.

Bob had a minute in which to think of Pia. He could understand her agitation now, and why she had asked him to leave Wild Horse. He shuddered at the thought that she might try to reach him.

He thought of the disclosures Cap Null had made. They had come so late that they had lost much of their importance. Even a day ago they would have made a difference. Bob had everything riding on Cap now. Knowing the man for what he was, it was asking a lot to have faith in him. And yet it didn't occur to Bob to doubt that Cap would get word to Matt. He couldn't explain it, and he didn't try. Sometimes a man found friends in strange places.

7-11 would be out on the range. Time would be lost even after Cap reached the ranch. When Matt learned what the situation was in town, he'd flash word to Diamond and a Half and the other outfits. Les would be the one to carry it. Les wouldn't let the grass grow under his feet.

With his ear close to the ground Bob heard the dull thunder of hoofs sweep up the street. A gun spoke, and then a score of guns. The slugs that struck the heavy door of the jail buried themselves in it; those that plowed into the 'dobe walls drilled through, their velocity only slightly lessened. Daylight showed through the holes they left.

There was a few minutes' quiet, then the beating of hoofs again. Bob knew Morrell had turned his men at the church and was about to race by again. With the thought, a leaden hail ripped into the jail. A few inches above his head, death whined. Hugging the floor, he was safe enough.

The maneuver of racing past the building and firing a murderous fusillade was repeated time after time. Only unbroken silence hovered over the jail.

"He's dead!" Bob heard someone shout. "We got him, boys!"

Nobody rushed up to batter down the door. A minute later, a man was at the rear window. A gun cracked; a bullet slashed through the wooden bunk. Bob turned and fired at the bottom of the window. A screaming curse rewarded him. Something struck the ground heavily, and he knew he had killed the man.

His shot dispelled any idea that he had been downed. An argument ensued outside. He recognized Doc Morrell's voice.

"He's flattened out on the floor!" Morrell railed. "We'll never fetch him

the way we been goin' at it! Bust the door in!"

There was a great amount of talk about how that was to be done. The voices moved out of hearing then. Every few seconds a slug knifed into the wall or thudded into the heavy door. The firing came from across the street. A small building, similar to the jail, stood there and was used as a storage room for grain and flour by Pike. Bob surmised that the snipers had broken into it and had either smashed or opened a window and were trying to reach him without exposing themselves.

A quarter of an hour passed. The shooting became desultory and finally stopped altogether. The explanation was not long in coming. Bob caught the creaking of wheels and knew a wagon was being brought up. From the orders Morrell was shouting, it was evident that the wagon was to be run backward and rammed into the door.

When it was turned, men lined up along the pole to propel and guide it. To keep Bob occupied, gunfire blazed again, from the right and left now rather than from Pike's storehouse.

Heaving mightily, the wagon was set in motion. It gained momentum in a few feet. Doc yelled for the men to let it go. In doing so, the pole turned slightly. One wheel hit the steps that led down to the door, the other missed them and bounced into the air and the wagon tipped over, hitting the door a heavy, glancing blow that ripped it off its hinges.

Though the door was down, the doorway was blocked. The crowd howled in dismay as it realized that the stratagem had not only failed but given Maxwell an advantage.

Two men—one of them the redhead who had claimed he was Jack Queen—made a dash for the wagon, hoping to climb over it. Bob saw their legs churning toward him. The sawed-off shotgun roared and they went down. He could have killed them as they threshed around in the dust. Knowing he had put them out of the fight, he let them drag themselves away on hands and knees.

In the spaces between the wagon spokes he could see that the window in Jesse Pike's storeroom had been knocked out. The sun glinted on the rifle barrels that rested on the sill. They belched angrily, a moment later. A slug pinged wickedly off the steel tire of a wagon wheel. Others ripped into the wagon box. The one that shrieked inside passed harmlessly over Maxwell's head. As long as they fired from the window, he knew they couldn't reach him. If they got up on the roof, it could be a different story.

Gunfire from the window across the way continued. The air reeked with the fumes of burned powder. Another half hour passed. Bob caught a fleeting glimpse of Doc as the latter hurried across the opening at the rear of the storeroom, carrying one end of a light ladder. It wasn't long after that before men were on the roof. They now had the angle they needed, and though the wagon blocked the doorway, it stood to reason that an occasional slug must get through.

Exchanging the shotgun for his rifle, Bob inched close to the barricade and began firing coolly and methodically at the edge of the roof. Heads that had been visible there, drew back turtle-wise. One man, who had been a second too slow, paid for it with his life.

Others took his place and the firing

continued, but so cautiously that nothing came of it. Unknown to Bob, Doc got up on the roof of the storehouse. Time was fleeting, Doc realized. The fruitless cannonading had already consumed almost two hours.

Belly down, Doc moved up until it was possible for him to make a cautious inspection of the battered front of the jail, the wrecked wagon, and the gaping doorway. With the rear window covered, the light inside was so dim that he could see nothing until a gun flash in the darkness told him where Bob lay.

"We're wastin' our time up here!" he growled at the others who had been firing from the roof. "We'll try somethin' else. Move back and I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do."

Without wasting a glance at the man Bob had finished off, Doc slipped back to the rear of the roof.

"A man might be able to get him through that front window," he told them. "He'd need somethin' to stand on. I'll take care of that; you boys stay up here and keep bangin' away at him. I can find a box down below. It'll take me a few minutes to circle around behind the jail. You'll see me when I get to the window. I'll give you a signal; you pour it into Maxwell then and hold his attention. That'll give me a chance to slap a shot at him."

It took longer than a few minutes, but he finally reached the corner of the jail. He waved his hand at the men on the roof and the gunfire became so continuous that Maxwell failed to hear him at the window, but he caught the shadow that moved across it a few moments later. The blue barrel of a six-gun appeared, and then the hand that clutched it. The gun was thrust in between the bars.

Snatching up his .45, Bob snapped a shot at the blue-nosed Colt. The bullet struck the gun at the trigger guard and glanced off across the fingers. The gun went flying and Morrell howled with pain. He had business away from there, and immediately. No one sprang forward to take his place. Slugs from within were knifing through the wall now and stitching a convincing pattern around the window.

The late afternoon grew still once more. After a long lull an attempt was made to burn the jail. Doc had an armful of kindling, covered with grease, tossed on the roof and ignited. The wood blazed fiercely, but the flat roof of the little building was covered with a foot of earth and would not burn.

Bob had lost track of time. The shadows were lengthening, however, and he told himself that if Cap had been able to get out of town he must have reached 7-11 long since. He was aware of the bigness of the "if" in his thinking, but his faith in the man did not waver. It wasn't only that Cap was doing him a favor; he had his own personal ax to grind. Bob believed he could hold the mob off until nightfall, at least. He was plentifully supplied with ammunition, and as long as he could see what was taking place, he felt he would be reasonably safe.

Every now and then he caught the low rumble of distant voices and surmised that a crowd had gathered down the street to watch what went on in the vicinity of the jail.

Morrell's followers were milling around, snarling at him over their lack of success and apparently undecided as to what to try next. Minutes passed before they made up their minds. There was a vacant field on the left side of the jail. Starting at the rear of

it, a rider pulled his bronc to a gallop and dashed around the corner of the building, bending low as he swept past the doorway and working his gun. He was followed by another and another until at least a dozen had engaged in the maneuver.

Bob felt one slug brush close to his cheek. The rest were wide or failed to get beyond the wagon. Instead of answering the shots, he hugged the floor even tighter. He was still in that position, when he heard someone yell, "We got him fer sure!" To prove it, one of them made another dash past the doorway and deliberately dropped his hat. When he came racing back to retrieve it, Bob put two bullets into it and sent it flopping out of the rider's reach. It convinced the besiegers that they were mistaken for the second time; Maxwell was still very much alive.

It got to be six o'clock. Doubt was gnawing at Bob. Where were Matt and the others? They should have been here an hour ago. He couldn't understand it. Had Cap failed him after all?

He heard an angry roar roll up the street from those who were watching. Nearer at hand, Morrell's men howled gleefully. Understanding came to Maxwell when Doc and another man moved into his line of vision. They had Pia with them. Keeping behind her, they pushed her out into the street and did not stop until they were no more than thirty feet from the door of the jail. Bob sensed their purpose instantly. Pia's terror-stricken face left no doubt but what she had been roughly handled.

With black murder in his heart now, Bob got Morrell in his rifle sights. But he did not squeeze the trigger, afraid lest in his excitement the bullet should strike Pia.

"Roberto—you can hear me?" she called.

"Yes," he answered.

"They promise if you give yourself up and leave town, they will not harm you. Please! Please, Roberto, do as they ask!"

"No," Bob told her. "You know they're not to be trusted. If I give myself up, they'll kill me. Even though I'm penned up in here, I'm some protection to you as long as I'm alive. If they kill me, they'll do as they please with you— Take her away, Morrell! You're wasting your time!"

"All right, Hank!" Doc growled. "Rip off her clothes! We'll see whether he crawls out of his rathole or not!"

While he held Pia by the hips, his companion stripped her to the waist. Shamed, horrified, Pia covered her naked breasts with her hands.

Bob couldn't stand any more. "You win!" he cried. "Here are my guns! I'll come out!"

Two men closed in on the doorway. Before they could pick up the guns, Queenie Anderson, all three hundred and twelve pounds of her, pushed them aside and rushed at Doe and the pock-marked thug who had stripped Pia.

The Gulch had seen Queenie on a rampage, but never as beside herself as this. From a safe distance, she had observed what went on here, and although for the better part of her life she had debauched womanhood, she was there to defend it now. No one better than she was able to recognize the wide gulf between the virtuous Pia and the soiled doves of her world.

In spite of her loose-tissued bulk,

there was a mountainous strength in Queenie. Catching Morrell by surprise, she pulled his .45 out of the holster and bowled him over. Whipping it high, she brought it down on the head of the man who was still struggling with Pia, putting so much force behind it that a grunt was wrung out of her.

Doc tried to grab her arm as he saw his companion go down. Queenie fought him off and leveled the gun at him.

"You miserable bastard!" she screamed. "Clear out or I'll save Maxwell the trouble of killing you! Git!"

Though he had an audience, Doc did not attempt to argue with her. He had brought Maxwell to terms, and that was enough for him. "Pick up his guns!" he yelled, running toward them.

Bob saw Queenie take off one of her numerous petticoats and wrap it around Pia. "Come on, dearie!" she said in her whisky-husky voice. "I'll take you home!" Glaring about her fiercely at Morrell's followers, she showered them with abuse and led Pia away.

"Come on, Maxwell, crawl out of there!" Morrell barked.

"I can't do it until you get this wagon out of the way," said Bob.

Morrell called up a number of men and after much grunting and pulling they got the wagon up the steps. They let go of it suddenly, however, and it crashed into the doorway again.

"What's the idea?" Doc rapped.

"Look up the street!" he was told.

"And take a squint the other way, too!" another cried. "It's Garner and Moffat! You said no one could git through to 'em, Morrell! They got the damn town surrounded!"

Bob filled his lungs with a deep breath of relief. So Cap hadn't failed him after all! Matt and the men from the hills were here at last! He couldn't forego a mocking laugh. He nearly paid for it with his life as one of Morrell's enraged adherents fired at him. The slug clipped his hair above the right ear.

Guns were cracking now. Doc's gang was numerous enough to have put up a fight. A few had that idea. Panic seized the majority. Some broke one way and some the other, only to be turned back. Morrell wanted none of it. He grabbed the nearest horse. Driving in between the storehouse and the building next door, he turned into the street on which Ben East lived. Bob saw him spurring away in the direction of the river.

7-11 crowded the mob past the jail. Les Quade was at the doorway then. "Maxwell!" he called. "Are you in there?"

"Yeh," Bob answered. "And *am* I glad to see you boys! Get this wagon off the steps, Les!"

Matt turned that way and ordered riatas put on the wagon pole. When the broncs put their weight on the ropes, the wagon was whisked out into the street.

Bob had seen where his gun had been tossed. He picked up his .45, broke it and shoved fresh cartridges into the empty chambers.

"I'm taking your bronc," he told Les.

"Where you goin', Maxwell?"

"After Morrell."

"Then I'll go with you," the doughty little man said.

Bob shook his head. "I'm going after him alone. That's the way I want it."

Avoiding the main street, he drove toward the river at a slashing gallop.

He was convinced that Morrell would either go directly to the Whisky Ranch or try to reach it by some roundabout way, hoping to find some of his crowd there and flee into the mountains with them.

Bob found no one at the ranch. He circled around to the far side of the stone corral and got down. Leaving the animal there, he moved along the curving wall until he was out of sight. The sun dipped below the horizon. As twilight came on, he saw a rider approaching. It was Morrell. On seeing the bronc standing there, the latter swung that way. Not seeing anyone, he got out of the saddle and walked toward the 7-11 horse. When he saw the brand, he knew he was in trouble. He drew a gun instantly and started backing away.

Bob had got behind him. Every step Doc took brought him nearer. They were not ten feet apart, when Bob said softly, "This is the end of the road."

Morrell whirled on him, gun raised, and then stood there transfixed for a moment as they faced each other. Bob did not hesitate. With less compunction than he would have shown a mad dog, he fired. Doc dropped his gun and clutched his stomach. But Bob wasn't finished. Again and again he squeezed the trigger until his gun was empty.

In town, all resistance had ended. Seven men lay dead in the street. Matt and Big John Moffat and the other stockmen were not fooling this time. Orv Pickett and his crew had arrived too late to be of any assistance, but their tardiness was due only to the fact that Orv had been the last to get word that he was needed. In the street, in front of the Barrett House, they had better than thirty men ringed in, all disarmed and not a growl left in them.

Bob forded the Rio Dolores and saw the circle of mounted men in front of the hotel. It told him that the battle of Wild Horse was over. His satisfaction was tempered only by his concern for Pia. Queenie Anderson came out of the shop and waited for him as he neared.

"Is she all right?" he asked.

"I put her to bed," Queenie told him. "Gil Peralta's wife and another woman are in with her now. You better not go in. I'll tell her you're all right. That'll quiet her better than anything else. Have you taken care of Doc?"

Bob nodded. "Out at the Whisky Ranch." After a moment, he said, "I don't know how to thank you. You're an old reprobate, and I don't expect you to change your way; but as far as I'm concerned, you squared your account this afternoon. It seems like pretty shabby treatment to have to put you out of business."

"That's okay, Maxwell. I know the Gulch is finished. Will you give me time to get my things out?"

"I'll try to give you a few hours. Get some wagons and start packing at once. When some of these boys get a little whisky mixed up with their excitement, something may give."

Les saw him coming and rode up to meet him. His first question was about Morrell. Bob gave him the same terse answer he had given Queenie.

"Good!" the little puncher declared. "You're hard to figger, Maxwell. When Cap Null showed up, I couldn't believe my ears."

"Where is Cap?" Bob asked.

"In the hotel. The old man wants to know what you want done with the bunch we got rounded up."

"Let's talk to him."

Matt and the other owners had already agreed among themselves on what should be done with the thugs they had netted and were only giving Bob the courtesy of expressing his opinion. It was nothing less than that the men should be marched over Apache Pass into Arizona, with death on sight to be the penalty if any sought to return.

"That's the quick way to get rid of them," Bob agreed. "You take charge, Matt. Leave me Les and two or three others and we'll clean up the town and move out any you may have missed."

The exodus began a few minutes later. There was work for the undertaker and doctor. When Bob had taken care of that, he began a round of the saloons, starting with the El Paso Bar, that had been outlaw hangouts. His edict was brief and to the point: close up and move on.

He encountered no opposition; saloonkeepers who had fattened on the crooks knew that the business was gone forever. It was the same in Rawhide Gulch. Wagons were at a premium. Gambling paraphernalia was being loaded. Other belongings, too expensive to freight out, were being left behind. The women of the district, drab-looking without their paint and spangles, were assisting with the work.

Bob had Les and another 7-11 man with him. One of the girls with whom Les had long been on intimate terms, hurled a curse at him. "I didn't think you'd do this to me, you little runt!"

"It's a changin' world, Milly," Les told her. "You can't be sure of nothin' no more."

On his way down to the Sandovals, after supper, Bob stopped at the hotel and saw Cap. The latter had several men helping him pack.

"Do you mind saying where you're going?" Bob inquired.

"That new gold strike at Silver Bell interests me. I figger I'll head that way. You got Morrell, I hear."

"Yeh, I did."

"Well, that don't square my score with him, but it helps," Cap observed vengefully.

"That's the way I feel," said Bob, thinking of Tom and Luis. "It doesn't square anything, but it helps."

At the shop, Emilia Peralta came to the door and told him Pia was sleeping.

Not in years had Wild Horse been so quiet. Bob walked the length of the street alone. In the churchyard, a light burned in Padre Donates's study. Bob tapped on the door and was promptly admitted. The aged priest was shocked by the violence of the past few hours, but he held that it had been necessary.

It was after eleven before Matt and his fellow stockmen led their little army back to town, hungry and impatient to celebrate their victory. Whose work it was Bob never learned, but they had not been back an hour before the Gulch was going up in flames.

Matt was the first to get his crew out of town. Taylor and Diamond and a Half were not far behind him. The other outfits soon followed. There was work to be done on the range and these lost hours would have to be caught up if the beef herds were to move on schedule.

Bob had no thought of sleep. He went as far as the ridge and had a look at the still, blackened remains of Rawhide Gulch. The end had come, and not only for the Gulch; all of west-

ern Mescalero County was now ready for law and order. Bob took little personal credit for it.

It was the silver star that did it, he thought. *It made the difference. I wouldn't have got anywhere without it.*

The days passed and Pia forgot the sharp pain of the shame and humiliation she had suffered and could laugh again. A great and new happiness was stealing toward her and when she glanced at Bob, her eyes danced with their old fire.

October had come. The leaves of the alders were turning yellow and up on the Divide there were patches of snow that would not disappear until another spring came. Children played in the streets once more; one could go about his or her lawful business without fear of insult or harm.

That Sunday, Padre Donates announced for the first time the banns of the proposed marriage between "Roberto Maria y Valdez Maxwell, the legitimate son of William and Margarita Maxwell, and Maria Piadosa Sandoval, the legitimate daughter of Antonio and Maria Sandoval," and bidding anyone who knew of any reason why the marriage should not be consummated to step forth.

When Pia and Bob came out from church they found a crowd waiting to congratulate them, and Antonio as well.

"Don't set the date too soon," Gil Peralta told them. "You'll need the surrey to bring you to the church in style. I'll have it repainted for you if you'll give me time."

"You better not take too long," Bob said, with a sly smile at Pia. "And while you're about it, Gil, you better sew up that bad rip in the back seat."

The crowd laughed, being familiar with the surrey. Not to be silenced so easily, Peralta said, "I'll spread a blanket over it and you'll never know it's there."

After dinner Bob and Pia strolled along the Rio Dolores until they found a comfortable rock. The air was crisp and she found a double comfort in having his arm about her as they sat there, lost in a dream world of their own.

"I think I should like to be married on my birthday." Pia saw Bob frown. "That is barely three weeks away, Roberto. Is it so long to wait?"

"It seems like a lifetime," he murmured, drawing her closer. "But I'll have to bear up," he added, smiling again. "When Buck was out after the cleanup, he made me promise to give him notice in time to be on hand for the wedding. And there's Matt; he won't be back from his trip to Santa Fe for another ten days. I want both of them to be here."

"So do I. They are so proud of you. Everyone is so proud of you!" She turned to him impulsively, and raising her mouth for his lips, she whispered, "I am to be envied, my darling!"

"No, Pia," he said. "I am the one to be envied! Not only now but through all the tomorrows to come!"

THE END

The stars had foretold the gambler's destiny—could men shape it otherwise? The miners of Moccasin Flat faced a vexing question.

BORN TO BE DROWNDED

By W. H. Hutchinson

THERE was nothing wrong with Moccasin Flat that a good dose of spring weather couldn't cure. For four long winter months, snow had enfolded the town and all the land beneath the crenellated Sierra Buttes in a fleecy blanket that was, as Long Aaron Lodge wrote in his diary, "gallus deep to a Pike County man an' him a'standin' on a pine stump."

For all these months, Moccasin Flat had had no mail from Marysville, no supply train from the valley far below. No one had gone hungry, for these were people who knew how to stock up before winter struck, but each and every person in the area was sick of his own company, his own inactivity.

Because of the snow, swirling down in one storm after another with flakes

as big and wet as sponges, it had been impossible to work the placers, even to moss or crevice for nuggets along the stream banks. Because of the snow, it had been impossible to go visiting, to go to town, even to cut wood unless a man cared to waste his strength just floundering around and getting no-place.

All through the snow time, Moccasin Flat had been too dead to skin. The miners could not come to town, the townies could not go any place but to bed, and the gamblers had long since exhausted the pleasures of solitaire or trying to short-card one another.

So it was with unalloyed delight that the dwellers on Moccasin Flat and its surroundings saw and felt a week of warm March weather settle on the land like a benediction. It was a week that melted the snow to a reasonable level; that sent freshets of milky water tumbling down Slate Creek; that started the buds on the canyon oaks to swelling ever so slightly. Even when the warm spell degenerated into a bitter cold snap, there was still rejoicing.

There was a crust on the snow that held a man up, that would let him go visiting, go to town, do almost anything but loot the placers—which could not be too far away now that the first touch of spring had come. And with the harbinger of spring, the snow they had cursed so bitterly in their isolation could be seen in its true light. It was their assurance of water, ample water, water enough to last all summer while they shoveled the gravel into the sluice boxes and let gravity bind the gold it held against the riffle cleats. The rise of water in Slate Creek beside the town was no more spectacular, no more natural, than the rise in spirits among the human prisoners of the winter.

Deciding to take advantage of the traveling weather, the gamblers and other merchants of Moccasin Flat determined to make a joint promotion for the sake of trade. Lacking anything as civilized as a Chamber of Commerce, they simply got together and appointed D'Arcy Racker, a faro dealer by trade and the leading gambler on The Flat, as their spokesman. Under Racker's guidance and after his opening contribution, a purse of a thousand dollars was raised to be the first and only prize in a great "snowshoe" race to be held on Moccasin Flat. Messengers were then dispatched to spread the word all up and down the diggings.

On the designated day, The Flat fairly split its seams with miners who welcomed the chance to break the monotony of winter life. They came to town to make a time of it, to cure their cabin fever, to make a jollification before spring really came and set them to work hip-deep in the icy waters of the placers. Among those who ambled into town was Long Aaron Lodge.

He was lean of waist and broad of shoulder, slightly stooped so that his rawboned height was not apparent, with a full brown beard and unbarbered hair of the same color. Long Aaron was reputed to own the richest claim on Slate Creek, and reputed still to have the first ounce he took from it. Not that he was parsimonious; just cautious.

He did not gamble, neither did he swear to excess. He chewed twist tobacco in moderation and when he took a drink, it was a full glass without any adjunctifications like sugar or bitters. His not gambling was a source of dis-

appointment to D'Arcy Racker, who always liked to have a man bucking the tiger with money to do it right. However, the two men got along well enough and had done so ever since Racker hit The Flat the summer before and built the Empire Hotel.

Every grog shop on the Mother Lode always claimed the title of Hotel, but the Empire was really a hostelry. It had cost Racker eight thousand dollars as it stood, the only building in town made of whipsawed lumber. One long, wide room with a loft reached by a ladder for blanket space, it was lined in blue and purple calico that billowed in the wind sifting through the cracks in the sheathing planks. A long board platform on wooden trestles formed the bar and, behind it, a wondrous mirror in a gilt frame was flanked by decanters, vases of cigars, and jars of brandied fruits. The rest of the main room was given over to tables, some of which were used for eating—the Empire's meals were filling and had variety, beans plain or beans greased being the choice. The rest of the tables were made and provided for gambling —Racker's own faro game and the other games he leased out to members of the fraternity on a percentage.

Racker's reputation had followed him to Moccasin Flat—several killings to his credit—and his face was marked with scars that showed it warranted. But past reputations did not matter when a man earned a new one in every camp and was judged by his actions in that camp. Racker's conduct on The Flat had been circumspect, his operation of the Empire had been on the square, he was always first to fill the hat for a man bad hurt or taken sick, and his gambling game was honest. Long Aaron Lodge had watched him deal faro, keeping cases with a Chinese abacus in plain sight of the players, and knew the game was square.

The two men, Lodge and Racker, stood together on the Empire porch to watch the start of the great snowshoe race.

The men of Moccasin Flat prided themselves on their skill with the snow runners. They came by this pride naturally, for it was on The Flat during the winter of 1850, just two years back, that Ham Ward and Jim Murray had taken staves from flour barrels and become the first men to lick the high Sierra snows, perhaps the first men in all the United States to use the Norwegian snowshoe. The "Alturas Snowshoe Club" was harder to make than the Masonic Lodge and the record time of 1200 feet in fourteen seconds was held by an Alturas member.

Each of the contestants gathered at the starting-mark before the Empire had his own set of planks—ten to fourteen feet long and four inches wide, cunningly hewed from oak and carefully planed, scraped, rubbed, and finished to the maker's taste. Each man had his own brand of "dope," compounded to his own secret formula from whale oil, fir balsam, glycerine, tallow, and ingredients known only to God and the maker.

When each man had finished doping his runners, kicked his boots into the toe-strap bindings of leather belting, and lined up at the mark, the starter, out of sight of the contestants to prevent fudging, fired his pistol and they were off. Just as they left the starting-line, a figure in long, billowing skirts, a veil, and close-knotted poke bonnet, swept around the far corner of the Empire and joined the race.

The sight caused a ripple of conjec-

ture to run through the watching crowd. The only women on The Flat could be counted on the fingers of one hand and still have enough digits left to roll a cigarette. And the various garments worn by the late entry could all be identified as belonging to various ones of the three ladies then residents. Still, a woman was a woman and if she chose to borrow clothes, the crowd was too intent on enjoying the race to indulge in morbid curiosity. They gave her a cheer as she glided forward after the pack.

She needed the cheer, for her long skirts worked against her on the first leg of the course, down canyon with the up-wind of afternoon holding her back. Still, she managed skillfully and was not the last contestant to round the halfway pole and head back for Moccasin Flat. And after the turn, she really traveled!

Her long skirts filled before the wind like a Cape Horner's sails. The crowd gave her cheer after cheer every time she passed another contestant. And despite the helping wind, it did look suspiciously as though some of the racers she passed were being perfect gentlemen.

Whether due to wind or chivalry, she passed the last man in the race handily and crossed the finish line in front of the Empire going away. Executing a fancy turn, the winner glided back to claim the purse while the other racers and the watching crowd swarmed about to see the face of the fair victor.

As the judge handed over the purse, announcing the winning time as he did so, the victor threw back her poke bonnet and veil to reveal the bearded, grinning, leathery face of Dave Tobin, a miner from up Slate Creek. There was a full-throated roar of laughter from the crowd at the hoax that drowned the murmurs of resentment from several of the losers.

With one accord, the whole throng headed for the Empire behind Dave Tobin to spend his winnings in the appropriate way. It looked like the beginnings of peart times on Moccasin Flat.

As the crowd came near the porch, Long Aaron spat reflectively through his beard.

"Dog on it," he said to Racker beside him. "Dave's been playin' roots on th' boys. Dog me! I think the race oughter be run over."

"Run over or not," said Racker grimly, "Tobin's race is plumb run out."

Stepping off the porch with these words, Racker confronted Dave Tobin in the van of the throng and calmly shot him through the chest. The crowd tumbled backward in a sudden scrambling terror, and Long Aaron launched himself off the porch onto Racker's back like a falling hop pole.

The force of his landing knocked Racker full length into the frozen snow. Before he could get back his wind or his wits, Long Aaron had rolled him over on his back and jammed his pistol muzzle in Racker's face.

"What the hell have ye been doin'?" he shouted.

The gambler seemed totally unconcerned about the pistol muzzle staring him in the eye, or about Dave Tobin's crumpled body looking somehow ludicrous in its borrowed finery.

"Aaron," he said mildly, "I just give a skunk his comeuppance. Fair's fair, say I, and dog them as don't play the game on the square. You said yourself it wasn't square for Tobin to win with

skirts."

Long Aaron nodded, remembering his words on the porch, but before he could say anything more to Racker, Tobin's friends in the crowd swarmed forward with angry yells of *"String him up!—Hang th' varmint!—Pore Dave didn't have no chance!"*

Long Aaron levered to his feet off Racker's chest and swung his pistol at the advancing crowd.

"Ye kin stop right thar," he yelled, "er thar'll be a stranger in hell fer supper."

The crowd stopped, those in front pushing back against the pressure of the eager ones behind them. Racker rose slowly to his feet beside Long Aaron, brushing ice particles from his flowered weskit, and faced the throng.

"If Tobin got a bum deal, you can try me in ary court in California," he shouted, "an' I'll go peaceable."

"Thet's fair ez fair," shouted Long Aaron in agreement. "We-uns ain't never had a lynchin' on The Flat an' I don' aim t' start the habit now."

The crowd swayed forward again, the blood mutter rising from many throats, but it broke irresolutely at the menacing pistol in Long Aaron's large and bony hand. The two parties faced one another for a dragging minute before a voice rang out from the mob.

"Ain't no court nearer nor Marysville," it screeched, "an' Racker's got money fer a lieyer t' git him off scot-free an' pore Dave's too dead fer thet."

The crowd muttered more angrily at this thought. The bolder spirits in the rear began to kick up chunks of the icy crust beneath their feet and to sneak their guns free of winter's garments. The first jagged missile arched over the front rank and Long Aaron hefted the heavy cap-and-ball in his hand.

"'Nother chunk comes thisaway, bullets is goin' thataway," he said, snicking the hammer back under his thumb, "an' I don' keer who they hits neither. Now you peckerwoods listen t' me. Tobin's dead an' mebbe he had hit comin'—most of us does. But thar'll be no lynchin' long's I got bullets t' argy-ag'in' hit. You boys in front thar is goin' t' jine Dave Tobin fust."

He swung the barrel slowly from side to side as if selecting a victim.

The front rank, appreciating their prominence, turned inward on the crowd. The chunk throwers, being thus exposed, lost their desire for practice, and sought eagerly to become the rear rank again. In the confusion of movement and thought, Long Aaron's voice was a steadying influence.

"We-uns'll call a miners' court hyar an' now," he roared. "We sittle claim-jumpin' an' water rights thataway, hit ought t' settle a killin' jest ez well."

He turned to the unperturbed Racker beside him. "Thet suit ye, D'Arcy?" he asked.

"Fine as frog hair," said the gambler equably, "only let's get it over with. I'm losin' money not tendin' my faro layout."

The crowd seemed relieved at Long Aaron's suggestion and even Tobin's most rabid friends were mollified by the invocation of the best justice they knew. The whole assemblage trooped into the Empire, following Long Aaron and Racker, and buckled down to the business of electing a court.

By mutual consent, Long Aaron Lodge was elected Judge; all hands agreed that he had acted with fine impartiality ever since Tobin was killed. A visiting miner from Port Wine Dig-

gings was elected Sheriff; he had been a sailor and was handy with knots if such skill was needed. An eighteen-man jury was elected by popular vote, Racker casting his ballot with the rest. A friend of Tobin's was chosen to be Prosecutor, while one of Racker's gambling friends became Defense Attorney.

When the formalities were completed, Long Aaron hoisted his buttocks up on the bar and rapped for order with the butt of his pistol.

"This hyar court is now open fer th' trial of a person accused of murderin' a fellow human bein'," he said firmly. "I kinder doubt my qualifications fer bein' Jedge but I'll do my best. Now then! We-uns is a fur piece in th' mountens from ary scrap of Californy law an' I misdoubt thet ary one of ye ez got ary word of thet law writ down on him. I aim t' put hit to a vote if we-uns should try this prisoner 'cordin' t' common sense 'thout worryin' 'bout th' statues made an' pervided."

He called for a show of hands and ordered the Sheriff to count the ballots.

The vote was all in the affirmative, Racker voting with the rest, and Long Aaron went about the next task of his judgeship.

"Hits customary t' open court with a prayer," he said, while his eyes searched the faces in the room. "How 'bout you, Tom Kirkwood?"

"Waal, Aaron, Yer Honor," said his candidate bashfully, "my ole daddy was some prayer fighter, fer a fac', but none of us boys took atter him. I ain't ekal to hit."

His Honor's roving eye fastened on another member of the crowd. "How 'bout you, Bill Stradley?" he asked. "Ye went t' camp meetin' right smart back home, er so you've give out."

"Hit was a true tellin', Yer Honor," said Bill Stradley, "but I went girlin', not psalmin'. It ain't in me t' give ye a heft."

"By Grab, I'll do hit myself," said Long Aaron resignedly. "T'otherwise we-uns'll be hyar all day."

He took off his hat and bowed his head forward onto one hand while the other hand retained its mastery of the pistol and his eyes stayed open. In short, homely and pungent words, Long Aaron offered up a petition for personal guidance during the trial. He asked that the hearts of the jurors be softened toward the prisoner that they might see and do justice according to their lights; he implored Divine Guidance for all concerned in discharging their elected duties; and he closed with an appeal for Heavenly Mercy toward the accused should he be found guilty and thus in need of it.

When he had finished, Long Aaron clapped his hat back on his head and cleared his throat, only to be interrupted by the prisoner.

"That prayer of yours has made me dry as a faro box," said D'Arcy Racker. "Let's have a drink. On the house," he added courteously.

The suggestion met with full judicial approval. After it had been consummated, Long Aaron got the trial under way. It was conducted with a perfect fairness that sought justice, not legalities.

The Prosecutor called witnesses who testified to seeing Tobin shot by Racker. Racker's attorney put him on the stand and elicited the testimony that he, Racker, had indeed shot Tobin: "Anybody as tried to humbug a whole mining camp deserved a bullet." Long Aaron ordered the case closed with

this statement by the accused and bade the jury start deliberating.

The jurors whispered together briefly and then the oldest miner on the panel addressed the Court. "Wal, Aaron —I mean Yer Honor, th' prisoner's guilty as hell an' no mistake!" He spat on the floor for emphasis while his jury mates nodded agreement behind him.

"Y' got ary argyment 'bout th' verdick?" asked Long Aaron, looking down at Racker and his attorney.

"None at all," said Racker calmly. "I shot Tobin an' I figure I had provoc'tion to do it."

Long Aaron almost nodded his head before he caught himself.

"Hit gravels me, D'Arcy," he said, "but thar ain't no way out. If we-uns had lynched ye, Moccasin Flat wouldn't be no better than ary other lawless camp. Now ye done had a fair trial— ye figger hit wuz fair, don' ye, D'Arcy?" He seemed almost anxious for Racker's confirmation.

"Nary a Jack turned from the bottom," said Racker.

"Wal, then, D'Arcy," said His Honor with relief, "if we-uns don' follow through with hit, folks'll think us Moccasin Flatters is jest talkers. Hits my dooty, D'Arcy, t' sentence ye fer hangin' by th' neck ontwell ye an' Tobin is keepin' comp'ny."

Racker pondered the sentence for a spell, turning it around in his mind, studying it with a gambler's concentration.

"I don't see how you could do much else, Aaron," he said finally. "She suits me as a fair trial an' a fair sentence."

He paused briefly and his voice grew stronger. "But I'll bet any man in the room five ounces that I don't hang by the neck 'til I'm dead."

Instantly the room was in an uproar as spectators, Sheriff, Prosecutor, Defense Attorney, and jurors rushed to get up a bet with Racker on his own terms. Long Aaron yelled for order, to no avail. Then he pounded on the bar for order until the planks shivered. Then his long arm reached out and began to rap for order with the pistol butt on the nearest heads handy.

"Holt on thar, all of ye," he shouted. "Them bets is null an' void besides bein' onlawful in this hyar court. Racker's done got so many bets out ag'in' him that folks'll say we hanged him jest t' c'lect. Ye hear me now! All bets on Racker not hangin' is off an' them ez don' git th' money back is in contempt of court fer twicet whut they bet."

The long-barreled pistol clunked on another unruly head to make the point clear and order slowly returned to the room. When a reasonable quiet filled the calico walls of the Empire, Long Aaron addressed the prisoner in a puzzled voice.

"D'Arcy," he said, "I never figgered that ye wuz foolish enuff t' bet ag'in' th' case kyard an' it a'showin'. Whut makes ye think it ain't a hangin'?"

Racker looked up at the long figure sitting jackknifed on the bar, and his eyes were as clear and as cold with certainty as winter moonlight.

"Aaron, Your Honor, it's like this," he said. "When I was born, the stars read out that I was born to be drownded. That was the way they read it to my mother. That's the way it's always been read to me by them as know the stars an' what they mean. So if the stars that have stood since time began say I was born to be drownded, how can I be hanged?"

There was the calm confidence in

his tone and manner of a Christian holding four aces. It was a living, tangible belief in his own destiny, as revealed to him by those who could "read the stars," that could be felt by every man in the room.

Long Aaron Lodge felt the emanation and was impressed by it in spite of his hard core of common sense.

"Man's got a right t' his beliefs, D'Arcy," he said slowly and thoughtfully. "If ye got nothin' more t' say, we-uns'll git alang with th' sentence of this court."

"I aim to see the case card," said Racker firmly. "I just think you're wastin' my time and yours."

"We-uns'll jest hev t' find out 'bout thet," said Long Aaron, "but fust off, le's hev a drink."

Prisoner, Court, and spectators lined the bar. With glasses filled, they drank to Long Aaron's toast—"Hyar's heaps of luck an' water when spring comes." Then they followed him outside to a convenient oak tree on the banks of Slate Creek—an oak tree with a stout and horizontal limb.

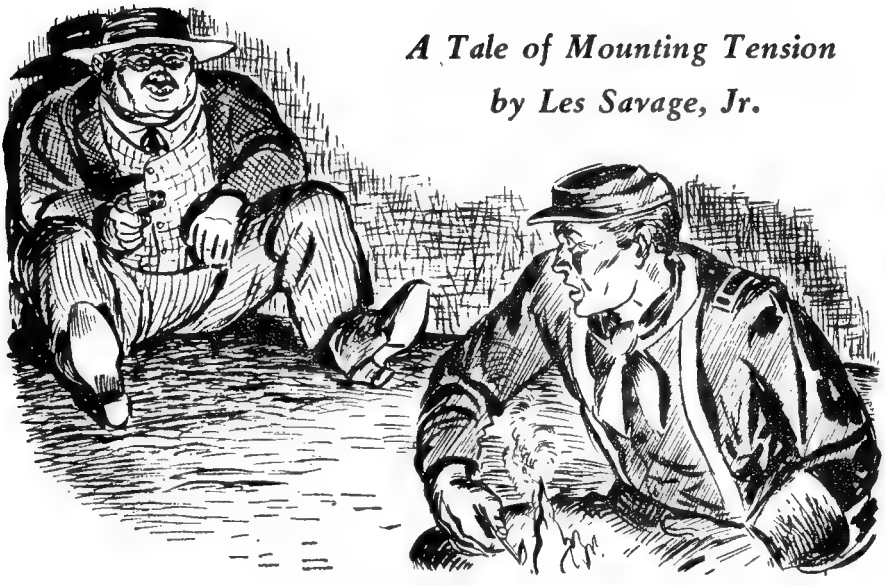
The Sheriff threw a length of rope over the limb and showed that he had not forgotten his wind-ship knack of knotting. Then, as Long Aaron wrote it in his diary that night:

Seems like them star readers done lost the run of the cards when they spelled out Racker's fortune.

TRAPPER TALK—*A Western Quiz*

THE HAIRY MOUNTAIN MEN—trappers, fur traders, explorers—who opened the doors to the West were experts in the flowing, graceful, expressive sign language of the Indians—but they "massacreed" English and other languages just as readily as they raised an enemy's hair. How do you rate as translator? Find out by matching the trapper-talk phrases in the left-hand column with the correct meanings, given in scrambled order, in the right-hand one. Answers on page 128.

1. Gnawin' pore bull	___ best grade of powder to put in your horn
2. Up to Green River	___ popskull; brave-maker; forty-rod—any beverage with authority
3. *Wagh!*	___ caught in a jackpot; hard times
4. Thet shines	___ leader of a fur brigade (corrupted from the French colloquialism for master)
5. Taos lightnin'	___ clear to the hilt; all the way
6. Thet naygur	___ man who hired out to trap for wages and eat company rations rather than be a free trapper (originally, a keelboat man from French quarter of St. Louis)
7. Hivernant	___ that's that; no room for argument
8. Pyore Galeny	___ friendly epithet applied to a fellow trapper
9. Booshway	___ man who had passed the test of wintering in the mountains successfully
10. Pork eater	___ as good as anything can get; superlative



A Tale of Mounting Tension

by Les Savage, Jr.

DANGEROUS ORDERS

Past and present—and the future of the Union cause in New Mexico—ride with Lieutenant Hunter as he leaves Tucson on a "secret" mission.

LIEUTENANT John Hunter, First Dragoons, stood beside his two big cavalry mounts on Tucson's *Calle Real*, watching the last Federal troops march eastward down the ancient street. It was June seventeenth, 1861. The withdrawal of Union troops for service in the East had loosed the long-restrained vengeance of the Apache. Southern Arizona was being laid waste, and refugees were streaming into Tucson, the only white outpost left for hundreds of miles.

The creaking wheels and tramping feet of the incoming mob beat up the dust till it filled the air with a mealy haze and settled in whispering white layers on the young lieutenant's uniform and face. It was a long and thoughtful face, already turned gaunt by the rigors of this land, with crevices of perpetual watchfulness at the corners of the eyes.

He straightened a little as he saw Sheridan Wade elbowing through the press. They had told Hunter it might start anytime. But somehow he had not considered Wade.

The tanned, youthful smoothness of Wade's face was a painful cultivation against the insidious signs of whitening hair and thickening belly which

even the impeccable cut of his bottle-green frock coat failed to hide. He saw Hunter as he struggled free of the mob, and a genial smile curled his mouth.

"Aren't you going with your company, John?"

Hunter kept his face blank. "I'm on orders to Santa Fe."

Surprise seemed to widen Wade's tawny eyes a little too much. "What a wonderful coincidence, John. I'm bound there myself. The last stage left yesterday and the bank closed before I could get my money out. I haven't been able to get hold of a horse."

His gaze turned covetous as it settled on Hunter's extra animal, and the lieutenant spoke sharply.

"That's my spare, Wade. I can't let anybody have it."

"What a way to treat an old friend," Wade said chidingly. He grasped Hunter's arm. "You have no idea how happy I was to find you stationed so close to Tucson when I came here last March, John. I swear I'd have seen more of you if I hadn't been so infernally busy. But now we've got to make up for it. You can't turn down a man from your own home town, boy—"

"I'm sorry, Wade." Hunter said.

Wade's hand slid off; it seemed an effort to keep the paternal indulgence in his chuckle. "You must be doing something infernally important to be so damn stiff."

Something slyly knowing licked through Wade's eyes. "Is it this last order issued by department headquarters at Santa Fe, John? All commanders in the Territory were to destroy what supplies they couldn't transport when they evacuated, weren't they? It's common knowledge that Apache raids have kept Fort Warren cut off from Santa Fe for months. Warren probably got the first order—to evacuate—on the twentieth of June. It was sent out some time ago. But they couldn't possibly have gotten this new order to destroy, could they?"

Hunter could hardly keep the shock from his face. How could the man know so much? If Fort Warren didn't get the order to destroy what supplies they couldn't carry, they'd move out in three days, leaving behind them enough stores for a regiment. It was as if Wade had read Hunter's mind.

"The only way Fort Warren could get the order to destroy is for one of the commanders down here to relay it by messenger," the older man said. "Are you the messenger, John?"

Hunter shook his head stiffly. "You've got it wrong, Wade."

"In a way, I hope I have," Wade said. "You must know the Confederates will have an agent out to stop those orders from reaching Fort Warren. You must know what that agent is capable of doing to attain his ends."

"You—Wade?" There was a soft disbelief in Hunter's voice.

The man chuckled heartily. "Lord Harry no, John. I'm just a banker. You know that. I only come to you as a friend."

He grasped Hunter's arm again. "Baylor and his Confederates are within a day's march of Tucson right now. They need supplies desperately. Those stores at Fort Warren would mean the difference between taking Arizona or not. All you'd have to do is see that the order to destroy doesn't reach Fort Warren, John. As simple as that. You can't let your own people down."

"You talkin' about white trash, Wade?" John asked softly.

Anger mottled the man's cheeks, but

he checked it with palpable effort. "Don't be like that. It's in the past. We're both in this together now, John. We're both fighting for the South."

Hunter's eyes were narrowed to slits. "What South, Wade? Yours or mine? Do you think mine's worth fighting for? Do you think I'd have left if I'd wanted to fight for it? A one-room shanty on a stinking backwater and a rag for a shirt and a handful of hominy—"

Wade held up a protesting hand. "John—"

"Or your South, Wade? You wouldn't give me a crumb of it before. Mint juleps and white houses and dimity women. Would Lucy speak to me on the street now? Would you keep me standing all evenin' at the back door with my hat in my hand now—"

"Damn you, shut up!" Wade had leaned so close their faces almost touched. Though his voice was barely a whisper, it was as venomous as a snake's hiss. "I made the mistake of treating you like a gentleman. Now I'm goin' to treat you like the white trash you are. No wonder my daughter laughed at you when you asked to court her. Lucy knew what you were, even better'n I. And it didn't change you none to run away. I'm through askin', John. I'm tellin'. I'm ridin' with you, and if you don't take me you know what will happen. There are a hundred Confederate sympathizers in this town that would jes' love to know you're carryin' those orders to Fort Warren."

Hunter felt his belly knot up with violent reaction. But somehow he checked himself, the blood pounding hotly through his head. Dimly, he realized Wade was right. A hundred sympathizers. They'd be on his tail the moment Wade told them. And it wasn't the sympathizers Hunter wanted. He stared at Wade, realizing what he would have to do. He felt his shoulders sag in defeat.

"All right, Wade," he said in a low voice. "Let's go."

He saw triumphant justification lick through Wade's tawny eyes. A justification of Wade's whole class, his whole way of life. The man settled back with a smug smile, squaring his coat with a pull at the lapels.

"Yes," he said, with a return of that lubricous geniality. "By all means, let's go."

The road unfurled like a saffron banner before the two men as they trotted northward from Tucson. The sun cast grotesque shadows at the foot of mesas flung like giant blockhouses across the desert. A field of sacaton grass slipped over the horizon, turned to a glittering sea by the brazen sun.

Hunter rode hunched forward in the saddle, eyes tirelessly moving across the endless expanse of earth which swept at last into the Superstitions lying in a jagged silhouette against the sky.

The lieutenant's mind was on Wade, at his side. He could not see the man's face, but he knew the expression it held. It seemed to symbolize the insidious pressures which had driven Hunter from his home in the first place. He had tried since early boyhood to rise above the degraded level at which his birth as the son of a river rat had placed him. He had battered his head for years against the cottony wall of patronization and tacit exclusion by Wade's decaying society. Perhaps the final blow had been Wade's daughter.

Hunter had worshipped Lucy Wade from childhood. As long as he had kept it impersonal, she had tolerated him. He had even taken a job as a stable boy on the Wade plantation—when few white men would be seen at such a task—to be near her. He could ride behind her on the hunt and drive her gig to town when she shopped. There had been a certain comradeship between them even under those circumstances. He had been blind to the patronization. But finally he had been unable to contain himself. He had told her how he felt.

Hunter could still hear her laughter, rich with derision and contempt. The whole town had known the next day. The whole town had laughed.

He had run from her laughter. Also he had run from something deeper. More than anything else, it had made him realize the futility of trying to change his station in such a society.

Wade's voice broke in on Hunter's thoughts. "Can't I have another drink, John? My throat's closing up."

Their canteens made a hollow clanking against the flanks of Hunter's horse, as he turned to look at Wade. The desert was beginning to take its toll. Wade lagged behind Hunter, his soft weight settled deeply into the saddle. But that smug haughtiness still lay in his eyes.

Hunter knew what was going through the man's mind. Wade thought the lieutenant would comply with this as he would have back in Virginia, bowing automatically to hereditary authority, reverting without a struggle to the old servility. That was the worst for Hunter. Knowing he could not strike back. Knowing he could not show the man how different the standards were out here; how a man's worth didn't depend upon his birth or his wealth; how he, himself, had changed.

"We drink at four, Wade," he said. "We don't reach water till night. I don't see how you ever thought you'd get through alone."

"I'd have managed," Wade said condescendingly. "My home office in Richmond needed a man to get what Confederate funds he could out of Santa Fe, before the Union confiscated them."

He broke off to cough as a hot wind swept parched dust into their faces. Then he brought his horse against Hunter, reaching for the canteen. "Damn it, John, give me a drink."

Hunter reined his horse sharply away.

"Don't crowd me, Wade," he said. "We drink at four."

Wade's eyes widened in surprise. Then the expression changed within them, and his mouth furled with contempt.

"White trash is gettin' high and mighty ideas again," he said.

Hunter's voice came out thinly. "You haven't got your hundred Confederate sympathizers out here, Wade."

The man settled back into his saddle, studying Hunter with a new calculation in his eyes. But he spoke derisively. "Think I'd really need them, John?"

Hunter glanced at him, trying to read all the implications in his face. Then he gigged his horse on ahead.

The heat seemed to grow greater through the afternoon. Hunter was seeing mirages now, lakes in the middle of a dry salt flat, cities where only the gnarled saguaro grew. They came to eroded bluffs and dismounted for a rest in the meager shade. Hunter was barely on his feet before he saw the

prints in the sand.

"Get aboard, Wade."

The man had just lowered himself against the sandy *barranca*, and looked up in surprise. "What for? We've got to rest."

"Not here. Can't you see those hoofprints? It's an Indian war party and it passed here within the hour."

To the east were badlands, gullies and fissures cut by centuries of wind and water into a weird labyrinth without end. They sought cover here and sweated without shade for the rest of the afternoon.

Hunter lay on his belly against a bank, scanning the sky in all directions with his four-power cavalry binoculars. At last he saw the stain against the ruddy banners of evening clouds. He let Wade see it.

"Smoke," he said. "It would come up in puffs if they were signaling. They've burned out somebody. We'll head toward it."

An edge of tension ripped at the cultivated geniality of Wade's voice. "Why go directly toward them?"

"Because they're about finished when they start a fire. They won't back-track. They're out looking for something else to raid now and they didn't find anything on their way through here."

Night darkened the sky till the smoke was no longer visible as a separate hue. They halted a few minutes for a cold supper from the lieutenant's saddlebags. The moon had risen by the time they reached the gutted buildings. Smoke still curled dismally into the night, and somewhere off a wolf was howling.

"This is our first water hole," Hunter said. "It's the Chicataw way station."

Seeing no sign of bodies within, Hunter led around the buildings to the rocky sink. He dropped his reins to the ground and hunkered down, scooping up a handful of water. He tasted it and spat it out.

"They've dumped alkali into the water," he said. "We can't use it."

Wade's rigging squawked as he swung off, his mouth starting to open in horrified protest. Before he could speak, there was a sharp rattle from the brush across the sink. Wade's hand darted instinctively inside his frock coat.

Moonlight spilled across the figure of the man who crawled feebly from the sagebrush across the water.

"I thought you was them warwhoops at first," he said feebly.

Hunter rose from his squatting position, hand still on the butt of his holstered Dragoon Colt, giving a glance to the snub-nosed derringer Wade had pulled from under his coat.

"I didn't know you carried a gun, Wade," he said.

There was a flutter of guilt in Wade's eyes. He shoved the derringer back into its harness under his lapel. His chuckle held a forced urbanity.

"Ace in the hole, John, ace in the hole."

Hunter was already hooking a canteen from his horse and moving around the tip of the sink. The third man sat heavily back into the sand, reaching eager hands up to hold the canteen as Hunter tipped it to his lips. He was a big rawboned figure with long-sleeved red woolens for his shirt and a pair of grease-blackened rawhide leggins stuffed into cast-off cavalry boots.

"You're Hock Ellis, aren't you?" Hunter asked.

"That's right, Lieutenant. Station keeper here. I was the only one left when them warwhoops jumped the station. I got out the back way and hid in the bushes. Been there without water all day. Damn sun clabbered my brains."

Hunter frowned suspiciously at him. "I thought that last stage out of Tucson was going to pick up all personnel as far as Salt River."

Ellis got unsteadily to his feet, handing the canteen back. "That's what saved me, I guess. Them Apaches thought the crew here had left and didn't bother hunting for me."

"We can't take you," Wade said. "We'll be lucky if we make it ourselves to the next water hole."

A wild look widened Ellis's eyes, then he caught at the pommel of Wade's horse. "You got to take me along with you, them Apaches are everywhere—"

Wade caught Ellis by one arm and jerked him loose, spinning him back so hard the man tripped and fell. Ellis rolled over onto his belly, staring dazedly at Wade.

"I wouldn't have thought you were that strong," Hunter told Wade.

The man turned sharply, almost angrily. Then he collected his gentility with effort, and that oily chuckle slipped from him.

"You don't want to underestimate us bankers, John."

Hunter's eyes traveled back to the station keeper, seeking some capacity for guile, for intrigue, in the man's equine face. He could read nothing but grim weariness. Then the irony of this struck him and he could not help a grim smile.

"Ellis will ride with you," Hunter told Wade.

Wade stared blankly. "We'll never make it. Three men on two horses. No water. All those Apaches between us and the Salt River. You're crazy, John—"

"But still a white man, Wade. Let Ellis get on first."

A raw wind mourned down off the Superstitions. It rattled through miles of creosote brush like the beat of an Indian tom-tom. It made Hunter shiver and huddle into his tunic.

The stage station was hours behind. Sheridan Wade's horse was beginning to falter beneath the double load. They had given the last of their water to the animals. Hunter knew if they didn't come up with the next sink before dawn they would have to spend all day without water. It was too risky to travel during the day with Apaches all around.

He began to keep his eyes open for a safe camp site. He was so intent on this that he did not notice how Wade's horse was lagging behind. Suddenly he realized it was no longer visible from the tail of his eye, and jerked sharply around in the saddle. The two men were a full length back of him, Wade sitting behind Ellis.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" Ellis said. "You look like the cat caught stealing the cream."

"Get ahead of me where I can see you," Hunter said.

The station keeper gigged the horse up. "What makes you so suspicious? You ain't got any more water left to steal."

"Perhaps he's wondering what your politics are," Wade said.

"I'm the best Unionist of 'em all," Ellis said. Then he spat disgustedly. "How do you get off wondering about

my politics, Lieutenant, you traveling with a damn Secesh banker from Virginia?"

"Don't rile the lieutenant," Wade said smugly. "He'd like to forget his origins."

Ellis glanced at Hunter's hands. The calluses were beginning to wear off, but the gaunt knobbiness that came from a lifetime of common labor would never leave. The station keeper read the story.

"You didn't git to live up in the big house, I guess, sipping them juleps and watching them pretty horses." His voice grew sly. "Is that what they call white trash down there, Lieutenant?"

Hunter felt his ears begin to glow. Wade chuckled, and it was filled with husky mockery. Hunter's hands closed tight on the pommel, and he would not look at them.

"How did a man like you git to be an officer?" Ellis said. "You sure ain't West Point."

"He was always a good bootlicker," Wade murmured.

Hunter looked straight ahead. He could feel the blood beating at his temples. But he realized there was even more reason to contain himself now. He had seen it as ironic, at first, that they were forced to take Ellis with them. Now he realized it might contain more irony than he had bargained for.

"You never did tell us how you happened to get left at the station," he told Ellis thinly.

"No room on the coach. They left me a horse. But he got away."

"*Did* he now?" Hunter said.

He saw surprise turn the man's seamed face blank. He jerked his head for them to go on. Ellis dug heels into his horse. Wade said something softly into the station keeper's ear. Ellis laughed gutturally.

They found the rotting building in the darkest hours before dawn. It was up in the wind-swept mesa land, crouched in the lee of a lonely bluff. Hunter checked his weary horse, peering through the thick texture of darkness at the ancient logs stacked into a beehive shape.

"We'll be safe," he said. "It's a *tchindi hogan*."

Wade frowned at him. "A what?"

"A devil house. See that hole in the north end? Some Navajo died here a long time ago. They knocked logs from the north wall and took him out there."

"Boy's right," Ellis said. "No warwhoop will ever go near this place again. Afraid the devils will get them."

Hunter tethered his horse and unsaddled. He stripped some kindling from the rotting logs that had been knocked out of the north wall, stooped into the low door with these.

He found the circle of rocks in the center where the ashes of countless fires lay in powdery dust, and stacked his kindling here. Then he ignited it. Flames licked upward, turning the film of alkali on his face to a mealy shimmer. Then his eyes widened with the complete surprise of it.

The light revealed an enormously fat man sitting in the far corner like some gross Buddha, holding a four-barreled pepperbox in one hand. He had a flat-topped hat jammed so tight it left a ridge of flesh just beneath the band. There were greasy channels in the deep furrows of his face where the sweat had run down to drip off his pink chin and make dark stains on his marseille waistcoat.

"George Mott, gentlemen. At your

service."

Ellis let out a low whistle. "Had me spooked, Mott."

Mott shrugged. "Apaches burned out Tubac. I thought it would be safer out of the Territory."

"We didn't see any sign in front," Hunter said.

"I hid my horse in a gully at the rear," Mott offered. He smiled slyly at Wade. "The banker from Virginia, I believe."

Hunter saw the little pucker of muscle run through Wade's face. The lieutenant remembered Mott now, an agent for some Santa Fe mining interests down around Tubac. The man had been through Tucson several times. His little eyes almost disappeared in their pouches of fat as they licked back across the room to Hunter.

"I understood most of the officers in the Territory were resigning their commissions in favor of the Confederacy."

"Is that what you understood?" Hunter said.

"He was traveling with Wade," Hock Ellis said.

"Well." Mott's chuckle shook his great belly. "Perhaps you and I are the only Black Republicans in the house, Hock."

Ellis snorted assent, easing himself to a sitting position against the wall, pulling his holstered cap and ball around so it lay between his legs.

"We'll have to draw a Mason-Dixon line right through the middle of this room," he said.

The heat of the fire was reaching Hunter, and he unbuttoned his tunic. "As I remember, there was a sink behind this hogan."

"Sink's still there," Mott said. "No water left."

Hunter saw desperation momentarily swallow the antipathy lying between the men. Wade lowered himself to a seated position, taking out a handkerchief and dismally wiping the grime from around his mouth. Mott looked at the pepperbox in his hand, put the gun away. As Hunter sat down, the jackknifing of his body shoved the manila envelope up out of its inside pocket till a corner peaked from beneath the lapel of his tunic. He saw three pairs of eyes swing to it.

"Orders, Lieutenant?" Mott asked.

"To Santa Fe," Wade said sardonically.

"My, my," Mott said. "I've heard an order was also sent for Fort Warren to destroy all the supplies they couldn't transport."

"Wonder what'd happen if them orders didn't reach Fort Warren?" Ellis said, turning wonderfully innocent eyes on Hunter.

"They'd leave without destroying the supplies." Mott's grin was cherubic. "The supplies would fall into the hands of the Confederates. It would practically give them Arizona."

"Them Johnny Rebs know about everything that's going on," Ellis said. "They must have an agent out to stop those orders."

"Or two agents," Mott said slyly, glancing at Wade.

"Or three?" asked Hunter, mildly.

Mott stared at him for a moment. Then a chuckle began to spread from the subterranean depths of him till the dank hogan was filled with great spasms of sound. Finally it settled back into the man and the hogan was quiet.

Despite Hunter's burning thirst, exhaustion bore heavily on him. He felt his eyelids drooping. The desire for

sleep became overpowering. He drew on all his will to remain awake. He sensed the culmination of the whole thing coming.

Mott began snoring softly, fat chin sunk against his chest. Wade let out his breath and leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes. Again that urge to sleep hit Hunter. He heard Ellis stir, and felt his eyes snap open. But the station keeper was only settling against the earth.

The fire seemed to fade out. Darkness gathered. Something cottony was closing in against Hunter. It was pain to fight it. Then something brought him awake again with that sick shock.

George Mott was staring across the fire at him with eyes sly as a weazel's.

Hunter shook his head, trying to clear it. At the same time there was a sharp whinny from outside, and the drum of excited hoofs. It brought Hunter instinctively to his feet, scattering the fire with a kick of his foot as he wheeled toward the door. He heard someone give a sharp cry as the coals hit and burned. Then he was plunging through the door with gun in hand.

He saw that it was his horse, running down off the slope with snapped reins. And even as he watched, the ungainly jack rabbit that had spooked the animal hopped off into the night.

Hunter went down the slope at a run. He knew the horse was too jaded to run far. He saw it slowing up ahead of him, and slowed himself so as not to frighten the animal further. He reached it and caught the reins and began to soothe it. He was several hundred yards from the house. The stars were out and the night was deadblack about him. Then he heard the first soft sound from behind him.

Quickly he tied the broken reins and led the horse a few paces to a creosote bush, hitching it firmly here. Then he walked directly away from it, making enough noise so they could hear him. Whatever happened he didn't want the horse to be spooked again. And he knew about what was going to happen.

He reached a gully filled with the acrid taint of greasewood. He moved down this for a dozen yards till he came to a dead end. He started to crawl up out of it when he heard the sound again. It was nearer. Already the pitch-blackness just before dawn was beginning to dissipate. He knew how swiftly light would come now. He had another moment to act.

If he left the gully now he would be trapped out on the flats without cover when light hit. Yet he would be just as effectively trapped in this dead-end if he remained. There was the faintest crackle of greasewood before a moving body. Then silence again.

He took off his cap and tunic. He bellied up against the bank till he reached a greasewood bush on the east lip of the gully. Pearly streaks began to drift through the blackness of the sky. He found an outthrust branch upon which to slide the arm of his tunic, wrapping the body of it around and pulling in the other branches till he could button it. Then he put his forage cap on the top branch. He slid back into the gully.

The pearly streaks were spreading out until there was no blackness left. He began to crawl up the other side of the gully. In another moment it would be light. There was more noise from the other end. He reached the western lip of the gulch. On the other lip across from him, the first of full dawn silhouetted the tunic, arm out-

stretched toward the sun. He grabbed up a handful of rocks and threw it across the gulch. They landed by the silhouette with a sharp crackling.

There was another vicious crackling of brush from the bottom of the gully, twenty feet down from the end, and the sudden blast of a gun. He saw the silhouetted tunic jerk. His Navy revolver bucked in his hand as he fired at the other gun flashes. He squeezed the trigger three times and then stopped. The echoes ran out into the desert and grew flat and small and died. The stench of black powder lay heavy on the air.

Finally Hunter edged on his belly through the bushes along the edge of the gulch till he came over the place where the fat man sat slumped in the sandy bottom. The front of him was soaked with blood, and his pepperbox had dropped in the sand.

"You're the only one?" Hunter said.

Mott's chin sank onto his chest. "That's right, son. I saw you in Tucson when all the other troops had gone. I figured you were the messenger. I got out ahead of you. The Indian sign drove me here. I figured it would drive you here too. There was hardly another route you could take. You'd know the safety in a *tchindi hogan.* So I waited—"

The last left him on a sigh, and his eyes closed. In a moment, Sheridan Wade moved around a turn in the gulch, staring at the dead man.

"I thought you were the one, Wade," Hunter said.

Wade was staring dully at Mott, his shoulders sagging, his voice strangely dull.

"Just a banker, John," he said wearily. "I told you that. I guess I had some idea of trying for the orders, if the agent didn't show up. I guess it doesn't matter now, does it?"

There was a rattling of greasewood behind Hunter, and Hock Ellis rose up, his cap-and-ball pointed at the lieutenant. "Maybe you'd better let a real Unionist take them orders the rest of the way."

Hunter turned, then silently pulled them from his pocket. Ellis opened the manila sheaf. Then his mouth parted in surprise.

"This is blank paper."

"The real orders are on their way by another route," Hunter said. "We knew the Confederates would probably have an agent out to stop them. I was supposed to decoy that agent."

He was watching Wade as he said it. The man stared at Hunter as if trying to understand something almost beyond his comprehension. His voice sounded weak.

"Then all the time—you only made me think—"

"Yes, Wade," Hunter said. "I had to let you believe nothing had changed. That you were still quality, and I was trash. I had to find out if you were the agent."

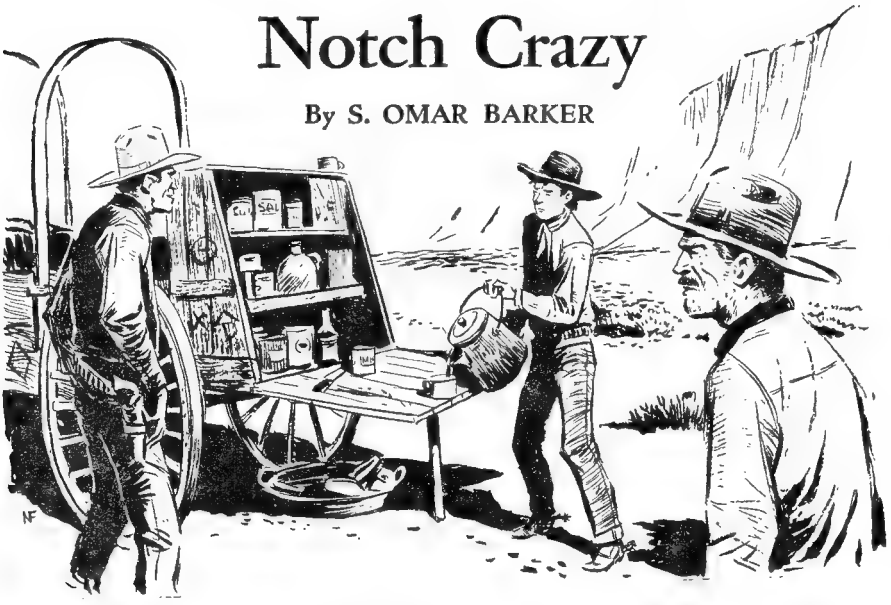
He saw the final understanding turn Wade to a defeated little old man. He tried to feel triumph. But Lucy and the past were too far away. He drew a heavy breath, turned to see Hock Ellis holding the papers out to him.

"I guess the things that make for quality or trash out here are a little different than they were back in Virginia," he said. "You've proved that to me as well as him, son. If these were the real orders, you'd be the man to take them. I owe you an apology. I'm only the second-best Unionist in the country. Kin I shake hands with the first?"

Something's bound to give when a trigger-happy badman figures his rep is at stake—the other party being both too young to die and too green to scare easy!

Notch Crazy

By S. OMAR BARKER



THE six sweaty men nooning at the Walking R wagon in Chupilote Canyon noted the approach of a rider on the zigzag trail down from Buzzard Mesa with varying degrees of interest. A faint and far-spread haze, residue from the good red dust of that morning's cow work in the canyon, made distance a thing of palpable pink, oddly distorted by the wrinkled air of pulsing heat.

Boyish, blond young Joe McQuinn, a newcomer at the Walking R tailgate and the only young hand on the crew, found himself obliged to squint in that peculiar glare even to make out what color the oncoming rider's horse might be. Not that he cared a hoot. His present interest went no further than to wonder why any man would be dropping down out of the Mesa's cool breezes into this canyon's stifling heat if he didn't have to.

But Rusty Wade, wiry, wind-wrinkled Walking R wagon boss, frowned as he put a name to the approaching rider while he was still a long way off.

"It's Flat-Nose Frank Halliman," he said uneasily, "pushin' a played-out horse."

"You've got damn good eyesight," said young Joe McQuinn.

"When you've knowed a jasper from a button," shrugged Rusty, "you recognize his style of ridin'. Frank rides like he shoots: rowdy an' reckless—but expert."

"That *chato* ees loco!" growled Tibo Solano with a nervous tug at his graying, middle-aged mustache. "I theenk

I will bockle me on the shoot-bang!"

The Walking R crew was made up of cowhands, not gunhawks, and it was the custom at Rusty Wade's wagon for all hands to leave their six-guns—if they had any—in their bedrolls or warbags or elsewhere at the wagon while working a herd. Now when the crew's veteran Mexican cowboy allowed he would put on his six-shooter, and started to get it, Rusty Wade interposed brief but earnest advice:

"I'd leave my go-bang right where it's at if I was you, T-Bone. An' the rest of you boys the same. No use invitin' trouble with a notch-hunter like Flat-Nose Frank. He's gotten to be awful bad thataway. Of course he may not even stop here, but if he does—"

"If he does," broke in young Joe McQuinn, "you don't want none of us armed? Not that I give a hoot, but why the hell not? I don't get it."

"I can remember," said Rusty Wade, "when Frank Halliman was a peaceable, promisin' young cowhand—about like you. Not so long ago, either. Then one day him and some feller fell out over a nickel's worth of nothin'. This feller was supposed to be a gunhawk, plumb feathered out. But somehow Frank got to his go-bang first. That killin' put the first notch on his gun—an' a locoed idea in his head. He's been notch-crazy ever since. Ready to pick a shootin' match with anybody totin' a shooter—anywhere, anytime, with or without due cause. But without no guns in sight, he'll be hard put for an excuse to bust a cap around here. Now—you savvy what I'm driving at, Mr. Quickaboo McQuinn?"

"Sure, sure!" Young Joe's shrug suggested sarcasm. "Do you want all six of us to act scared of the curly wolf all at once—or just one at a time?"

"I won't have to *act* skeered," sighed Baldy Sloan with a grin that looked a little grim. "Flat-Nose would purt near as soon shoot a gun-wearin' man as look at him, just to prove he's the main high horny toad with a hawgleg. The hell of it is, the booger *is* fast on the draw."

"He must be," said young McQuinn dryly, "the way he's got you ol' roosters a-lookin' for a haystack to hide under!"

"I ain't so old *yet*," shrugged bristle-chinned Jug Johnson, "but I'd sure like to git thataway alive."

"I ain't skeered of rattlesnakes either," offered sober Sid Wilkins, "but I don't go 'round matchin' spit with 'em. Rusty's right, kid. My gun stays outa sight—an' my fool mouth shut!"

"Maybe he ain't comin' here anyhow," said Rusty Wade again. "Maybe—"

"Already he make turn on the trail thees way," broke in Tibo Solano. "By whiskers of the saints, weeth t'orty-t'orty I can knocked him off hees horse, don't never knowed what hit heem!"

"Might not be a bad idea, at that," said Baldy Sloan.

But nobody made any move to do so. However troublesome they might expect him to be, heading off even an unwelcome visitor with a bullet and no warning simply didn't tally up with cowboy nature.

Neither did anybody try to stop young Joe McQuinn from getting his six-shooter out of his warbag and buckling it on. They had had their say.

"I don't know this flat-nosed gunhawk from hell's hind end," said the kid cowpuncher, watching the approaching horseman through narrowing gray-blue eyes, "an' I ain't no trou-

ble hunter. But I'll be damned if I'm goin' to leave my gun off just to accommodate the habits of any two-legged critter alive!"

"You like to be buried deep or shallow?" asked Sid Wilkins so soberly that even Rusty Wade had to grin.

"You ain't hurrawin' me none!" Young Joe McQuinn had the good grace to grin about it, too. "I don't aim to take no big behavior from nobody!"

"Leave the kid shuck his own corn, Sid," advised Rusty.

Flat-Nose Frank Halliman rode up and dismounted at the Walking R wagon like a third-rate actor making a villain's stage entrance in "East Lynne." He was a moderately tall man, slightly shoulder-hunched under a showy-white sundance Stetson. He had a Colt's .45 holster-tied low on his right thigh and a Winchester booted on his saddle. His horse was plainly plumb wore out.

"Howdy, howdy, hired men!" His small-toothed grin was wide but unhumorous. He turned the calculated stare of his coyotelike, pale brown-green eyes on the wiry little Walking R wagon boss. "Well, if it ain't the ol' brad-bottomed buckaroo from the head of the branch! Still sweatin' to make the big owners rich, eh?"

Rusty Wade ignored the half-sneering question.

"What you want here, Frank?" he asked bluntly.

"Fresh horse," said Flat-Nose. "An' a damn good 'un! They got a shot deputy sheriff back at Cabresto an' they claim a feller with a flat nose an' a fast gun done it a-purpose. If there's anything stronger than seep water in that coffeepot pal, I'll have me a cup."

Rusty Wade pointed with his chin toward a couple of empty gray-granite cups on the tailboard of the chuck wagon, and said nothing. Instead of going after them, the visitor looked around him at the rest of the crew, one by one, as if sizing them up for caliber. His gaze stopped on young Joe McQuinn's six-gun—the only one in sight—and an odd gleam came into his pale eyes.

His sun-chapped lips parted to show the two rows of small, almost babylike teeth—once more a grin without humor in it.

"Fetch me a cup, Buster," he said. There was a flat-drawling tone to his words that emphasized the absence of "if you please," making it definitely an order.

"You go to hell!" said young Joe McQuinn.

"Maybe you don't know who you're sassin'," said Flat-Nose Frank.

A red-hot flush crept up over the young cowboy's cheeks.

"I know," he said, "an' I don't give a damn! I ain't nobody's flunky!"

Flat-Nose Frank gave a slight hitch to his gun belt. He faced McQuinn squarely, spraddling his legs just a little. A cold, fanatic fire seemed actually to widen the pupils of his eyes. Rusty Wade had seen that half-insane, staring expression a few times before on the faces of notch-crazy killers.

"God damn you!" said Flat-Nose Frank. "I said *fetch me a cup!*"

There it was, sooner and with even less pretext than any of them had expected: two with guns, an issue without appeal, and none the less deadly for having been forced to a head over so inconsequential a thing as a gray graniteware coffee cup.

Here in the dusty-pink haze of honest, sweating cow work in a heat-sim-

mered canyon, it was an incredible thing that in one swift, irreparable moment a beardless young cowpuncher might die for no more cause than to prove himself unruled and unafraid. Yet not wholly incredible, either—to hired-men-on-horseback who lived by the cow-country code that every pot must stand upon its own bottom.

Maybe it was this code that now held Rusty Wade, Baldy Sloan, Sid Wilkins, Tibo Solano, and Jug Johnson silent and motionless. Or maybe it was the fact that their guns were stowed away in warbag and bedroll—and that Flat-Nose Frank was warily watchful of every movement.

Fluent with gringo swear words, old Tibo did go so far as to call Flat-Nose Frank a vile four-syllable name. But it failed to distract the gunman's gaze from young Joe McQuinn.

"I heard that, greaser!" he growled. "I'll 'tend to you later!"

"Frank," said Rusty Wade quietly, "this boy ain't done you no hurt. Whyn't you leave him alone?"

Flat-Nose Frank didn't answer. His right hand stood out a little from his body, ready for the swift, snakelike flash to his gun butt that would probably mean another notch in it—if young Joe McQuinn didn't back down.

In the ticking off of a dozen tense seconds, the flush of bold anger slowly drained out of Joe McQuinn's smooth young cheeks, leaving them pale above tight-drawn lips. Instead of reaching for his gun, he turned slowly, walked to the chuck box, and brought Flat-Nose Frank a gray graniteware cup.

"I don't see no coffee in it!" Flat-Nose Frank's sneering triumph seemed tinged with regret for a lost killing.

Looking whipped and bitterly shamed, young Joe McQuinn poured hot coffee in the cup and handed it to him. His eyes avoided the gaze of those who had so recently heard him talking big mustard. Those same men had stood by and seen him backed down by a badman bully without raising a finger to help him. For that he could not honestly blame them, unarmed as they were; except maybe Rusty Wade, whose anxiety to sidestep trouble had let Flat-Nose Frank cut this cake his own way. Right now it was not what young Joe McQuinn thought of them that bothered him. It was what they must think of young Joe McQuinn—who talked a good gun fight but didn't have the guts to deliver.

"Well," said Sid Wilkins dryly, "it looks like we been beat out of that grave-diggin' job."

It was plain that Flat-Nose Frank Halliman was glorying in his present role of main he-wolf—even though his was the only gun in sight—except, of course, young Joe McQuinn's.

"Give this coffee-cup kid a little practice," he cracked, with his peculiarly ugly grin, "an' he'll make somebody a plumb do-cile flunky. So how about gittin' him to rope me out a fresh mount, Mister Wade? I want the longest-steppin' son of a snort you got. Somethin' to out-travel a sheriff!"

"Better ketch him ol' Hi-Step, Joe," said Rusty Wade, as matter-of-factly as if giving a routine roundup order. "You know him—that long-shanked K-Bar sorrel of mine with the bug-track blaze. He ain't been rode the last few days. He'll be fresh. An' just wait till you see how he travels! I'm tellin' you, Frank—you ain't rode a hoss like ol' Hi-Step since you quite honest cowpunchin'!"

"He sure as hell better be good, be-

cause– Hey, flunky! Just so you won't try no funny stuff, lemme hold that hawgleg while you're ropin' out the wonder horse! Lift your mitts an' back up here where I can git aholt of it!"

Young Joe McQuinn turned slowly around, facing his tormentor. He seemto hesitate a moment, then dropped his coiled lass rope and took a couple of steps toward the badman bully. The very deliberateness of his movement made it a challenge. Rusty Wade saw that much clearly. He also saw the look of surprise on the face of Flat-Nose Frank give way to the gloating stare of a notch-crazy killer whose skilled right hand was already gliding in that snakelike way toward the butt of his gun.

In that instant the wiry little wagon boss stepped between the badman bully and his prospective victim. He stood there unarmed, facing the former.

"You sure look purty, pickin' on a raw kid, Frank!" Rusty's mild, quiet voice had a dry, sharp hardness in it. "I ain't no gun fighter, but by God, if you're hankerin' for a shootin' match, I'll just borrow this boy's gun an'–"

At the crack of Flat-Nose Frank's six-shooter the little wagon boss spun around, staggered a step or two, and stumbled to his knees.

"Damn you!" said young Joe McQuinn. "You never had no call to do that!"

The young cowpuncher's voice was shaky, his chin a-tremble–but not his hand.

Exactly how many shots were fired in those brief red moments there in Chupilote Canyon, is not of record. But it has been asserted with some pride by certain old cowpokes there present that young Joe McQuinn, scared and white to the gills, nevertheless stood firm in the face of killer lead to tally his share of the hits–and a little more. Even Rusty Wade, groggy and down with a slug through his shoulder, saw the strange, wild look of surprise on the face of Flat-Nose Frank as he suddenly pitched forward, dead before he hit the ground.

Blood reddened the shirts of both young Joe McQuinn and "old" Rusty Wade, but it was blood that by some miracle of fate or fortune flowed only from outer flesh, not from the inner organs of life.

"You done good, Joe," said Rusty Wade when their wounds had been given a temporary tending to. "You killed us a mad dog."

"He walked on his hind legs," said young Joe McQuinn. "I can't help wishin' he hadn't."

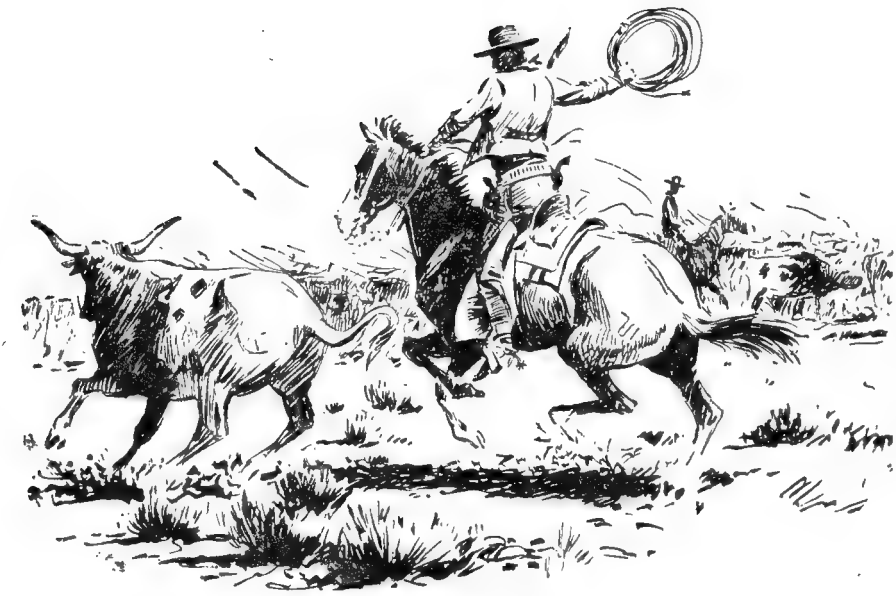
"By the hind end from a burro!" snorted old Tibo Solano. "What kinda talk thees? Hand me those gun, keed! I'll cut the notch on heem for you–beeg Nomber One!"

"You go to hell," grinned young Joe McQuinn, plenty different from the way he had said it to Flat-Nose Frank –and didn't hand over the gun. "Look!" He lifted his chin toward the zigzag trail down from Buzzard Mesa and the three riders hurrying down it through the heat-pulsed haze.

"Sheriff Tatlow in the lead," said Rusty Wade.

"You got damn good eyesight," said young Joe McQuinn. "I expect he'll be glad we never loaned Flat-Nose Frank that horse."

"God save the young an' iggerunt!" said Sid Wilkins in his sober, eye-twinkling way. "How far you reckon ol' Flat-Nose would have got on a *locoed hoss*–that won't travel no way but bassackwards?"



Wagon-Boss Independence

By J. FRANK DOBIE

The foremost storyteller and folklorist of the Southwest recalls some characteristic and amusing tales of the great trail-drive era.

WE ALL want to be free. We all want to be independent. Most of us admire independent people unless their independence subtracts from our own domination. It is harder to be independent under an industrial system managed by gigantic, standardized corporations amidst dense populations than in sparsely populated spaces utilized only for grazing or farming.

I doubt if any wage earners ever were more independent-natured than the old-time cowboys; I doubt if a more independent set of bosses ever existed than the old-time range and trail bosses. Probably some imagined themselves more independent than they actually were. When a man gets to where he can't have heroic dreams about himself, he is fading.

An old-time wagon boss who used to tell me tales and for whom I had a strong affection was John Rigby, for many years brand inspector at Beeville, Texas. One year, he said, while he was trail boss for Dillard R. Fant, he reached the Arkansas River south of Dodge City with his herd in prime condition. He knew that Mr. Fant would be in Dodge awaiting several

herds and trading, but he did not expect the big cowman to make his appearance in the way he made it.

The herd was just being pointed into the Arkansas, to cross to the north side, when here came Fant driving up in an open-top livery rig that he had hired in town and had driven across the river some distance below. He was eager to see his steers and eager to help cross them. He drove down the sloping bank on one side of the herd but, instead of helping, confused the steers and caused them to start milling out in the water. It was not deep at this place, and Fant drove on out in it until he struck a deep hole. Soon his high-stepping horses got tangled up and were drowning. John Rigby was riding a good swimmer. He rode out, roped Fant, and then pulled him to shore.

Dillard R. Fant got up spluttering. "Jesus Christ and General Jackson," he spluttered—his favorite oath—"what did you rope me for? Why didn't you rope that team? I could have stayed in the buggy."

"Mr. Fant," John Rigby replied, "your team was already drowned when I roped you, and you were drowning. And right now I want to tell you this. If you ever come balling up another herd of mine, I'll quit right there."

Well, Fant realized he had been in the wrong. He promised not to come too near his own cattle again in the wrong way. He went back to Dodge City and paid $800 for the livery outfit he had lost.

A trail boss could not be as dictatorial with his hands as a sea captain can be with sailors, but he was as responsible and often had to be as self-reliant. One time Crusaw Beard, trail boss for Dudley H. Snyder, came to Buffalo Springs in the Panhandle with a very thirsty herd. There was plenty of water for many herds, but the owners—the X I T outfit—were trying to stop trail-driving through their range and had three cowpunchers guarding the Springs.

"You can't water here," one of them said.

"We got to water," Crusaw Beard replied.

"The first cow brute that walks into the water will drink Winchester lead," the guard said.

"We got plenty of it," Crusaw Beard retorted. He watered his herd and none of the animals drank Winchester lead.

My old friend Bob Beverly of Lovington, New Mexico, used to work with Barnes Tillous for the Quien Sabe outfit on the Plains. Barnes Tillous had grained and trained a grullo-colored colt that he called Possum. He was very fond of Possum. One day when he rode Possum into Midland, a buyer of polo ponies tried to stop him and buy the pony. Barnes Tillous never stopped or even looked at the man—"He just rode on, like he was going to church." The buyer was so anxious, however, that he found out where Tillous was camped and followed him eight miles.

He found Tillous feeding Possum oats.

"My name is Savage," he said.

"I can't help what your name is," Tillous retorted. "I didn't give it to you."

The polo buyer went on to say that before he left San Antonio he had talked to M. Halff, owner of the Quien Sabe outfit, and that Halff had told him he would sell—at a fancy price—any horses suitable for polo to be found in the Quien Sabe remudas.

"It is about time for chuck," Barnes Tillous said.

The polo buyer followed to the chuck wagon, telling how he liked the looks of Possum and how he would like to try him out after dinner. As soon as dinner was over, Barnes Tillous without a word put his saddle on Possum and rode away. Some of the hands told the buyer that he had just as well go back to town. He went and wired M. Halff. Halff wired Tillous to sell any horse that the buyer would take.

Tillous never even answered the telegram. He was something more than a "hired man on horseback."

Of course it takes resourcefulness and decisiveness to back up independence. One of the main range families of early-day Texas was the Slaughters. When he was eighteen years old, William B. Slaughter, long since dead, was bossing a herd of two thousand steers on the trail for Abilene, Kansas. Somewhere in the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) he and his men met cowboys from a Grimes outfit riding south mighty fast. They said Indians had taken their herd.

Bill Slaughter did not propose to turn back, but when he was an old man he said he felt more shaky that evening than at any other time of his life. His father was a Baptist preacher as well as a cowman and had picked a very religious cook named Porter to go up the trail with his son. As soon as camp was made, young Slaughter asked Porter what he thought about going on.

"Will we get through?" he asked.

"Well," Porter replied, "I'll have to talk to the Lord about this."

After supper Porter went away out to one side, built up a little fire, and by the light of it read his Bible. Then he must have prayed. In the morning he came to Slaughter and announced:

"We'll get through all right."

"How you know?"

"Why, the Lord told me so. I've talked to him and he has talked to me. No need to worry now."

Meantime, Bill Slaughter had acquired confidence. As he told me the story, not long after midnight he mounted his night horse, already saddled, and rode out to where Wash Wolf was standing guard. It was a beautiful night and the cattle were all bedded down and breathing heavy in sleep. He knew that Wash was a bad man, but he was the best hand in the outfit, and before the outfit started up the trail Parson Slaughter had made him promise to see his boy through. He was from South Texas and had been in some kind of trouble.

When Bill Slaughter rode up to him, he did not appear a bit glad to see him.

"Billie," he said, "what in the hell are you doing out here this time of night?"

"I want to see you and talk with you," the young boss replied.

"Well," Wash Wolf went on, "damn it, can't you trust me?"

"Yes, I trust you fully."

"Goddamn it, the cattle are all asleep and the night is fair and there's no trouble stirring. By God, you don't think I'd go to sleep on herd, do you?"

"No, I don't think you'd go to sleep on herd."

"Well, what in the hell do you think?"

"Give me a little time, Wash, and I'll explain. You know that the Indians are out ahead of us and that we are moving toward trouble. You are quick to fight, but we've got to get these cat-

tle through without a fight and a stampede, no matter if we have to take some things from those Indians. You promised my father that you would see me through. Now I want you to promise me that you will not shoot until I give the word."

"Well, I don't propose to be run over by any son-of-a-bitch of an Indian but I'll promise."

"All right, Wash. Now I want that desperado rag you've got about your waist."

Wash Wolf wore a red Mexican sash about six feet long and three wide. "Billie," he said, "if you knew the story of that desperado rag, you would not ask me for it. I'll tell you how I got it when we get to Abilene. I just wish you wouldn't ask me for it."

"If you'll let me have it, when we get to Abilene I'll have Colonel C. C. Slaughter buy you a new suit of clothes."

"I'd give a half dozen sashes for a new suit of clothes," said Wash, and he took the sash off and gave it to Bill Slaughter.

"I have a plan," Bill said, and went back to camp and to sleep. The next morning when he started the herd on north, he carried Wash Wolf's desperado rag and three new red bandanna handkerchiefs in the bosom of his shirt.

About noon the herd halted on the south side of Wolf Creek for dinner. "I sort of smelt Indians," Bill Slaughter said. He told the cook to put to one side a good supply of flour, coffee, bacon, and sugar.

Before the hands were through eating, about thirty Indians rode up. The chief came directly to the wagon and demanded food. He got the supply already arranged for him. Meantime, some of the warriors were whipping the cowboys' horses and the cowboys were following instructions not to start anything.

At this point Bill Slaughter unbuttoned his shirt, pulled out the three big bandannas and the long desperado sash, and waved them in front of the chief. He was simply delighted. He said he wanted beef, and Slaughter had three sore-footed steers cut out for him. He and his followers killed them at once and made camp and the Slaughter outfit drove on for Abilene.

"The Lord told me we'd get through all right," the cook said that night.

Answers to "Trapper Talk" Quiz on page 109

1. You "gnawed pore bull" when you experienced hard times or got caught in a jackpot. 2. "Up to Green River" meant clear to the hilt (of a Green River knife) or all the way. 3. "*Wagh!*" meant "That's that!"—the clincher to any argument. 4. "Thet shines" pronounced something to be superlative. 5. "Taos lightnin'" was any beverage with authority. 6. "Thet naygur" alluded to any friendly fellow trapper. 7. A "hivernant" was a trapper who had wintered in the mountains. 8. "Pyore Galeny" was the best grade of powder to put in your horn. 9. A "booshway" (from the French *bourgeois* was the leader of a fur brigade. 10. A "pork eater" was, first, a French keelboat man; later, a trapper-for-hire.

RANGE PRIMER

By

C. William Harrison

Young Bax Lufton struggles against approaching manhood—until a marauding mountain lion teaches him a basic truth about the ways of men.

YOUNG Bax Lufton never forgot that day. He had been picking his way through the rocks that crested Squaw Ridge, armed with the sling he had fashioned from a pair of rawhide thongs and a rectangle of leather, pausing now and then to hurl stones at imaginary enemies. He was a boy thinned from growth, and his incredibly blue eyes looked out at the world with wonderment and eager curiosity, for at his age each day seemed to open an entirely new vista to him.

He had paused on the rim of the ridge to look down into the basin and out across the badlands they called Diablo's Hip Pocket, and beyond through the smoky heat haze to the far distant peaks he had never heard named. He had stood there motionless, his imagination pleased by the hugeness of the world. That was when he had seen the two riders burst out of an arroyo far out in the basin.

He watched them with an idle wonder that drew out swiftly and became edged with alarm. Still he had no real understanding of what he was witnessing, or the full implication of it. He only watched, vaguely troubled by the way those two men lashed their horses to heart-bursting speed. They seemed to be racing toward the badlands.

Sun glare hurt Bax's eyes and made them water; he wiped them with his sleeve, and when he looked again the two riders had changed direction, angling sharply and desperately toward the canyon that gouged through the plateau east of the basin.

The movement of other horsemen, diminished by distance, caught the boy's attention, riders racing out of the arroyo behind those first two and another tight group quartering the flats at the edge of the badlands. Then he saw the third group lashing out of the canyon and completing the triangle inexorably tightening around the two fleeing riders.

Bax watched it all from the rim of the ridge. He recognized the white-stockinged mare, and knew with a sharp stab of alarm that his father was riding with that posse of valley ranchers. He heard the swift burst of shots, and saw the fleeing men jerk their mounts around and kick them desperately toward the ridge. Then they reined in, throwing down their guns as if suddenly without the necessary energy or will to carry on their hopeless flight.

The valley ranchers converged on those two, and there was a flurry of movement that was on the edge of brutal violence. Understanding raked Bax's mind then. At night in his bed he had heard fragments of conversation between his mother and father about cattle thieves and the impotency of the law two hundred miles away at the county seat; he had heard whispers about the valley ranchers organizing to protect themselves. This, then was the outcome of that talk—a vigilante posse.

Bax watched, amazed that his father, always a mild and kindly man, had taken part in such a thing as this. He watched his father ride his tall mare through that tight group, and knew talk was being made. Presently the horsemen shifted, moving across the flats toward the ancient cottonwood that towered below the ridge.

They halted beneath the tree and two ropes, thrown up over a high limb, uncoiled and dangled above the heads of the two riders. Unbelieving horror squeezed cold and tight around Bax's heart.

"No, Pop," he whispered—"don't let them do it."

He saw it all. He saw the nooses fitted into place, saw the white staring faces of the two doomed men. He saw the ropes drawn taut and knotted around the trunk of the tree, and he saw two ranchers—one his father—take places behind those two:

No, Pop, don't do it! You can't, Pop!

He saw the final swift action, the sudden plunge of the horses, and the slow-swaying shapes that were blurred by the hot wetness in his eyes.

He could no longer escape the truth. It had happened, and his father had helped do it. His own father had helped kill! That brutal fact drove its chill sharp edge deep into Bax, and he turned, stumbling blindly through the rocks, and was sick.

When Bax turned eleven he was thin and leggy, already reaching toward his father's height, but without the breadth or weight.

"The way he's growed this last year," his mother said, "reminds me of a colt put out on clover pasture."

Across the breakfast table that morning his father's glance was soberly amused.

"He's getting big enough to do a

man's work, and that's a fact."

His mother smiled, and his father went on in his gravely thoughtful way. "When they're big enough, they're old enough for a man's chores, is what my pa always said."

Bax gave all his attention to his oatmeal, refusing to read anything personal into this talk. There was water to be brought up from the well for the weekly wash, firewood to be chopped, and the break in the south fence was over-due mending; the cave-in that had choked off Mormon Spring had to be dug out so the cattle could get water. Bax heard all this, but refused to let it touch him.

"You got anything planned for today, Bax?"

For a moment the boy was silent. Then he said, "I kind of thought I'd like to go hunting along the crick bottoms."

His father spoke quietly. "I could sure use some help at the spring. We lose any more cows, and we'll be on mighty short rations next winter."

Bax put down his spoon, and a strong defiance went through him as he looked at his father. "The jack rabbits have been playing hob with Mom's garden." That was all he said; it was his decision.

Lufton looked across the table at his wife. "Well," he said, and faintly moved his shoulders. "The rabbits need thinning out, all right."

They watched Bax, his face tautly expressionless, leave the table, get the lunch he had prepared, and go out of the kitchen. They heard his shrill whistle and the answering yelp of his red hound dog. Through the window they watched boy and dog head off in the direction of the thickets along Prieta Creek.

"What's come over him, Will?" Mrs. Lufton asked. She turned and saw the regret in her husband's eyes. "It's not like Bax to refuse to help with the chores."

Lufton looked away from his wife. "I reckon it's my fault, Mary, in a way."

"I don't understand, Will."

"Maybe I should have told you," Lufton said. "All this year I've thought he'd get over it, but maybe he'll never forget or understand." He took a slow breath. "Bax saw what happened that day over in the basin."

"Oh, no, Will!"

"He saw, all right. Even if I'd known he was up there on the ridge watching, it couldn't have changed anything. It had to happen, Mary. There was no other way."

"I know," she said softly. "But for him to have seen such a thing—"

Lufton turned away from the window, a tall man whose face was never without its indefinable expression of kindness, in whose eyes lay a humble man's pride and a tolerant man's long patience.

"My father was a God-fearing man," he said slowly. "I looked on him as the finest and best father a boy ever had. One day I saw him lose his temper and swear the way most other men do. It was the first time—the only time, I guess—I ever heard him cuss, and—Well—"

He frowned, irritated by his inarticulateness. "It's hard to tell, Mary. A boy has a way of setting his pa apart from other men, like he's the strongest and bravest and finest—you know what I'm trying to say, Mary?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Hearing my father lose his temper and cuss—well, it kind of tore me up

inside. He stopped being a sort of god, and all at once I could see his faults. It's like thinking you own gold and then learning it's only pyrite."

"I know, Will."

"It's worse for Bax," Lufton said. "I tried to teach him to be kindly and do good by his neighbors—and now he looks on me as a cruel man, a killer. That's why he won't help with the chores. He thinks helping with a man's work will make him stop being a boy. Maybe he doesn't want to grow up because he doesn't want to ever be what he thinks I am, and what he thinks all men are."

Mrs. Lufton touched her husband's arm. "I'll talk to him, Will. Those men had been warned. They murdered Charley Hensoldt when he caught them rustling his stock. We had to be our own law. I'll talk to Bax and try to explain."

"No," Lufton said, and shook his head. "He'll have to work it out for himself. It's the only way, Mary."

With the .22 under his arm, Bax came to Prieta Creek with its deep thickets of cottonwoods and willows. He skidded down a cutbank, ducked under a low limb, and kicked off his boots. The stream was full at this season, the water clean and swift and so cold that, after a while, it turned his feet and ankles pink with a tingling sensation of warmth. A fallen leaf floated downstream, and he watched it sweep past him, bouncing and spinning through the fast water shallows.

He thought that someday he would follow the stream until it became a river, and follow the river to the ocean, and he wondered with a feeling of awe what an ocean looked like. In this thirsty desert country north of the Grand Canyon it was almost impossible to imagine water as far as the eye could see.

He waded out of the stream, and sat down in the sand. He listened to the day's small noises, the chatter of birds and the rustling of breeze-stirred leaves; he looked at the .22 that belonged to him alone, and suddenly he felt so good that he couldn't hold it back any longer, and threw himself back on the sand and let out a wild Apache yell that brought his red hound bounding out of the brush in startled curiosity.

The boy laughed, and squirmed his shoulders into the warm sand. Overhead, an eagle wheeled and curved in the Utah sky. The dog trotted over, regarded him gravely for a moment, then stuck a wet nose against his hand, making an impatient sound in his throat.

"All right," Bax said. "We'll go see how Mrs. Pickett is making out with her twins."

He got up, and with the rifle under his arm turned upstream without any real directness of purpose, exploring the rocks and thickets as he went. He discovered a wren's nest low in the branches of a willow and had his long moment of rapt inspection, careful not to touch the eggs. He thought he would come back tomorrow, and the next day, and the days afterward until the eggs hatched; he had always wondered if a young bird could fly the first time it tried the air.

These things had been the flow of his life during the two years since he and his mother had joined his father at this remote valley ranch. He had explored the hills and arroyos in ever-widening circles around the ranch house, and those first few months he

had thought of the ranch as a barren and lifeless place.

But he had come to learn how wrong that was, for as time passed he became somewhat like an Indian, soundless in his movements and his mind untroubled and at ease, open to accept the impressions that came into it. He had learned to be still and to watch, with no regard for time—and that was when he became aware of the play of life all around him.

His understanding increased with his skill in seeing and hearing. He came to understand each small sound and the meaning of it, and from thick, hidden places he studied the arts of the hunters and the cunning of the hunted. He saw quail scatter and vanish so that it was seldom possible even when he carefully searched the grasses for him to find them. He watched a she-coyote teach her litter to stalk rabbits and make their kill, and he learned the trails where the mule deer ran when drought forced them down from their higher feeding-grounds.

He absorbed these things with boyish pleasure, and if there were times when he felt guilty of neglecting his parents he remembered the thing he had seen his father do, and his mind refused to accept the responsibilities of an adult's world.

He came soundlessly around a bend in the creek, and saw a jack rabbit bounding unhurriedly up the yonder hill slope. He sent out a short sharp whistle, and saw the jack instantly freeze, only its ludicrously long ears testing the air for danger. It didn't occur to Bax to kill the animal as a pest. Even with the new rifle under his arm, he had never once thought of loading it to destroy life.

The hound came bucking its way through a tangle of brush, and Bax went on. He wondered about Mrs. Pickett and her twins. He had given that name to the cow the day he had climbed the crest of the hogback now looming ahead, and had discovered the animal in a small meadow-pocket concealed by the curving arm of the ridge. Mrs. Pickett had dropped twin calves—a rarity on the range—and Bax had watched secretly, careful not to disturb them. Now he was paying them another visit, proud of the secret he shared with them.

Halfway up the hogback, he heard the sudden heavy bellowing of the cow. He broke into a run, scrambling up the rocky pitch, alarmed. He topped the final rise gasping for air and with sweat stinging his eyes. Downslope, through the manzanita and mesquite, he could see into the small brown meadow. But he couldn't see Mrs. Pickett. The cow's bellowing came from farther along the ridge; he heard a heavy threshing sound and thought he caught the feral snarling of another animal.

He spun and forced his way through the brush along the high spine of land. He came to an open space, and now he could see the entire meadow below. He saw the calf belly-down on the grass, its head twisted around at a cruel angle and showing the wounds that raked its throat. The calf was dead.

The manzanita on the yonder side shook under a violent impact, and Bax crouched to better see. He saw Mrs. Pickett make a swift head-down rush at an enemy he could not make out in those opaque shadows, but he heard the spitting snarl and understood—a mountain lion.

He didn't think to be afraid. He was awed, but not frightened. He saw Mrs.

Pickett change direction and hit a tangle of brush with explosive force. He saw her other calf, confused and panicked, come plunging out of the brush and stand behind her. The cow, head-down and defiant, backed away, forcing the calf with her.

The big cat followed, low to the ground and fluid in its movements, a tawny shadow of brute violence. It drifted off at an angle and slanted back again, ears laid back and eyes glaring. It advanced and raked out one bladed paw with blinding swiftness; it leaped to one side and then hurled at the cow. The cow heaved her horns, accepting the cat's punishment and giving its own. The big cat bounded away, and instantly came back in a low slashing rush, a yellow blur that leaped, twisted, and fastened on the cow's neck.

Without realizing he had done it, Bax loaded the .22 and fired.

He stood there, scared now and shaking, while the echoes of the shot rattled off into silence. The lion was gone, and he realized the hound was racing after it, his full-throated baying racketing up toward the redrock cliffs above.

Bax followed. Crossing the meadow, he saw the great slashes across the calf's throat, the redness and the crumpled looseness that was death. He started crying as he ran, because that was a life he had seen given into his world—and now that life had been wantonly destroyed.

He kept running up the steep slope until he could no longer run, then he walked, still following the distant baying of his hound. Even then he felt no hatred toward the lion, only a dull hurt and resentment that was not a thought but a vague and uncomprehending impression.

He came to the redrock cliff and trotted along the tail of the talus slope. He could hear the hound's deep baying somewhere in the cedars up ahead. He tried to shout to the dog, but there was not enough air in him. He stumbled on, limber-kneed from the climb and drawing in great gulps of air.

Now he could no longer hear the dog's baying, and as he came to the cedars he slowed to a walk, anxiously probing the shaded places for his dog. It was very quiet, and he walked without disturbing that quiet. He studied the downslope and the ground ahead and, lifting his glance, he saw movement higher up, along the foot of the cliff. It was the hound, lunging up at the bare rock and trying to climb.

Bax wanted to cry out, but the warning was lodged in his throat by sudden fright. For now he saw another movement, the tawny and soundless prowling of the big cat on an upper ledge. He watched. The cat drifted along the ledge, rounded a jutting of rock, crouched and dropped to the base of the cliff with no sound to betray it.

An overwhelming admiration came up through Bax's first fright as he watched. This was the cunning of the wild, the intelligence; the lion had led the dog to the cliff, had doubled back along the ledge, and now was free to escape.

But not intent on escape! Understanding came with swift and chilling clarity to Bax. The tawny shadow flowed soundlessly along the shoulder of rock, curved around it, and there was the hound still scratching and leaping at the cliff, with the big cat now behind it. The cat sank and seemed to lengthen, and this was, Bax knew, the beginning of murder. The cat began its swift slashing rush, without warning.

Bax jerked up his rifle and fired. He shouted. All movement froze. The lion halted its rush, veered around, and for the barest instant was locked motionless by its startled confusion. The hound whirled, and for the space of a heartbeat stood in stiff-legged inactivity. The boy stood staring, and for the first time in his life knew the real power of fear.

The cat was first to break. It spun, lithe and flashing, and made again for the ledge on the cliff. The hound rushed and broke the cat's leap, and they fell back to the ground snarling and slashing. The cat's raking pad knocked the dog aside, and the hound rushed in again, driving for the throat.

Bax reloaded the .22, but was afraid to shoot. The lion rolled and shook the dog and threw it aside, claw-raked and bleeding. Bax saw that redness, and a cold and terrible anger went through him. He aimed carefully and fired again.

He knew his bullet had found its mark. The big cat flinched as it leaped for the ledge but failed to make it. It fell back, and the dog rushed again. The cat dodged away, no longer so swift and sure in movement; it wheeled, cut off from the cliff by the hound, and broke downslope. Bax could only watch, for his rifle was empty and there was no time to reload.

It was not late; the sun was still high and hot in the cloudless Utah sky. Bax walked slowly across the dry brown range, stopping now and then to examine the dog's wounds. He came to the line fence and followed it until he came to the break where his father was working.

"I heard you banging away at the jacks," Lufton said. He straightened, wiping sweat from his eyes. Then he saw the claw-raked hound and alarm widened his eyes.

"It was a lion," Bax said.

They looked at each other, father and son.

"The lion killed one of Mrs. Pickett's calves," Bax said. "It was trying to kill the other one, but Mrs. Pickett fought it."

Lufton took a breath, saying nothing. He had never heard of Mrs. Pickett before, and did not understand. He waited.

"Red chased the lion up to the cliff, and I followed. The lion could have got away, but it went back and tried to kill Red. It didn't have to, but it tried. From behind. I shot it with the .22, but it got away."

Bax was thoughtful for a moment. Then he spoke quietly. "Pa, why did the lion try to kill Red when it didn't have to?"

"Well," Lufton said, careful to choose the right words, "sometimes you've got to fight and destroy—like Mrs. Pickett tried to do—in order to protect your own kind. You don't want to, but you just have to."

Bax thought about this, and then slowly nodded. He looked off in the direction of the thickets along Prieta Creek, but for some reason he could not quite remember what he had planned to do over there today. Whatever it was, it did not seem to matter so much. He looked at the break in the fence.

"We can start digging out the spring after the fence is fixed."

"We'll take care of Red first," Lufton said quietly. He started in the direction of the ranch house, with Bax matching his own long strides. "The other chores can wait until tomorrow."

An Original ZGWM Fact Feature by Fremont Sellersbee

Billy Lowden's Record Ride

WHENEVER the talk turns to men and horses of the Old West, the miles they covered, the times they made, the standard of comparison seems always to be the men and livestock of the Pony Express—among them "Pony Bob" Haslam and his one-hundred-twenty-mile ride in eight hours. Yet years before "The Pony" raised a dust across the face of the West, there were riders who made far-apart tracks that make even The Pony's exploit look like a Sunday canter around the park.

There was Francis Xavier Aubrey, who won a bet that he could ride from Santa Fé, New Mexico, to Independence, Missouri, in less than eight days by doing it in less than six. There was Howard Egan, riding for Chorpenning's pioneer mail line, who made a Salt Lake City-Sacramento round trip by muleback in ten days. There was Warren Wasson, who, during the Washoe War against the Pahute, rode from Genoa, Nevada, to Honey Lake Valley—one hundred-ten miles in fourteen hours—*without changing horses.* But of them all, before The Pony or after, none seems to have made a faster distance ride than W. S. ("Billy") Lowden did in January, 1854.

Lowden's ride was made in California, where the tall tales grow, but it was made before the days of zealous Chambers of Commerce and it was not measured by the prejudiced eye of a paid "praise agent." Lowden's ride was part of a titanic struggle between the giants of California transportation—Wells Fargo vs. Adams Express—and Lowden rode for Adams.

The occasion for his ride came about with the arrival in San Francisco of an important message from the President of the United States, Franklin Pierce, that had to get to Oregon without delay. Since there was no telegraphic communication between San Francisco and Portland, and since the coastal steamers were more than normally uncertain in winter weather, delivery of the message was clearly a job for the express companies.

Both Wells Fargo and Adams were eager to outshine the other in delivering the text of the message. Not that their fee would be any plum, but the advertising—free advertising—in the newspapers would be most welcome to the winning firm. While they were competitors in banking, finance, and transportation, the very nature of the route to Oregon made delivery of the message a personal struggle between the men and the horses of the rival firms.

From San Francisco to Sacramento,

a river steamer would carry both firms' express bags. From Sacramento, however, the bags traveled separately, though both companies used the route that ran up the east side of the Sacramento River to Mill Creek (Los Molinos) where a ferry crossed the river to Hall's Ranch (Tehama). The common artery of travel then ran up the west side to Shasta City, over Scott Mountain to Callahan's, thence to Yreka, and across the Siskiyou Range to drop into the Willamette Valley and down it to Portland. All along this route, using the same change stations, each firm stationed relays of horses and hostlers; fresh riders took over at division points that varied in distance according to terrain and the men available.

At Hall's Ranch where the ferry came across the river, Billy Lowden, twenty-four and hard as nails, waited to make the ride to Shasta City, sixty miles away. For his services and the use of four of his own horses, Wild Cat, Comanche, Pompey, and Jack, Lowden was to receive $2000. He was worth it and so were his mounts.

Waiting on the west bank at Hall's Ranch, Billy Lowden saw the Adams rider from Marysville thunder down onto the ferry scow alone. But before the crossing was completed, the Wells Fargo rider pulled up to meet the ferry when it came back. The width of the Sacramento River at this point was not a comfortable margin of victory and Lowden knew it.

He was in the saddle when the rider came scrambling up the slope on a dead-beat horse and the heavy express bags, fifty-four pounds weight, were changed on the run. Coming in to the next stage station, Lowden gave a piercing whistle a half mile before he reached it. This was his pre-arranged signal to the keeper, who immediately tightened the cinch on the fresh horse and, mounting his own animal, had the relay moving at a fast gallop when Lowden came pounding alongside. Billy made the change at full tilt, springing from one horse to the fresh one, and then shifting the express bags.

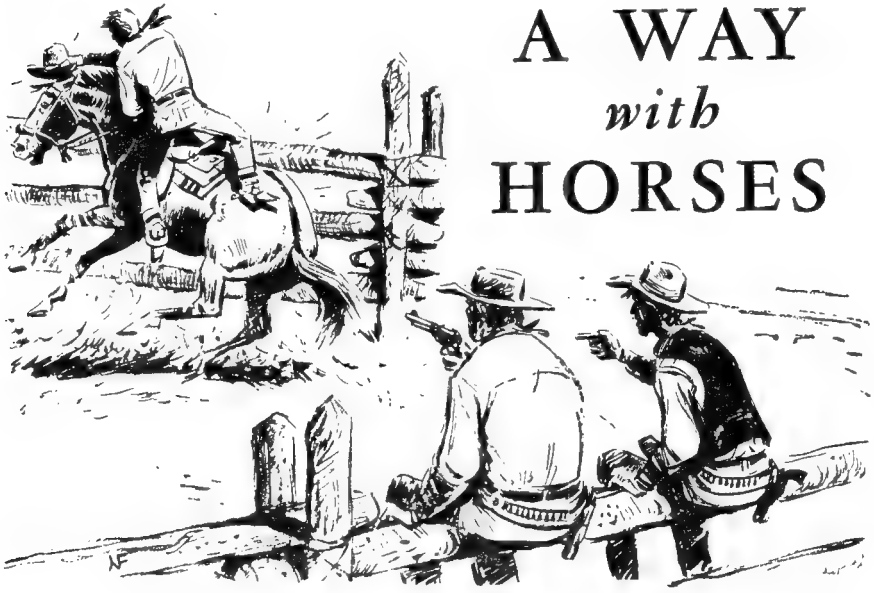
Repeating this performance at every change point, Lowden pelted into Shasta City just two hours and thirty-seven minutes after he left Hall's Ranch, with nineteen changes of horses in the sixty miles and only touching the ground once.

This involuntary grounding came when Billy thundered into Prairie House to find the Adams & Co. keeper locked in violent conflict with his rival, the Wells Fargo hostler. In the heat of the fight, Lowden's fresh mount had gotten loose and was racing away.

As Billy described it in later years, "I rode a little past where the fight was going on, sprang to the ground, and caught the fresh horse by the tail as he was going away from me and went into the saddle over his rump at a single bound. Turning to the horse I had just left, I pulled the express bags over on my fresh horse and renewed the race. I lost about one minute here."

Even with this lost minute, Lowden pulled in to Shasta City so far ahead of the Wells Fargo rider that the race was ended then and there as far as opposition to Adams & Co. was concerned. As for Lowden, he took an express bag for Weaverville, his home town, and covered the forty mountain miles from Shasta there after dark and with a light snow falling in two hours and thirty-six minutes, with nine changes of mounts. And on neither leg of his ride did he ruin a mount. He was a rider!

Johnny Money knows horses, sure 'nough, but when it comes to critters like range hogs and pretty gals he needs a mite of close-herding by a savvy squawman!



A WAY *with* HORSES

By Alec Campbell

Chapter One

Tracks in the Trail

PUSHING his battered Four-X beaver to the back of his head, Johnny Money cased the tracks in the Big Valley trail. His nose wrinkled unconsciously as he catalogued them for future reference—two shod and one barefoot on a long lead and all still firm-sided fresh—before pulling his hat down over his red-brown thatch and angling away from the rimrock after them. He rode easy on himself and the speckled Rowdy horse with a long stirrup and the easy grace of a man who has never known the limits of his own endurance.

The morning sun, just clearing the sawtoothed mass of the Warren Range, was full in his face, throwing its square-framed planes into sharp relief and lighting his purplish-blue eyes that had nothing to hide from the world or from themselves. It was a late-spring morning with a lingering fragrance of dew-kissed sage in the air, and Johnny Money sang as he rode—a song about Buster Jiggs and Sandy Bob who roped the devil and snubbed him short to a black-jack oak. If there was any tune, the Rowdy horse was carrying it, rolling the beat with the bit wheel in his mouth, but it was a cheerful song that matched the morning and Johnny's spirits.

The tracks he was following had halted briefly where a line of fence posts, new-set and free from wire, marched across the juniper-studded benchland from the bulging bluffs of the Warrens to the rimrock overlooking Big Valley. Then the tracks had dropped down into an unexpected little basin below the level of the bench. Johnny read the sign as he pulled Rowdy up between two naked posts and eased himself in the saddle.

A flicker of movement below him caught his eye—two riders were angling across the basin floor toward the north slope. Johnny pulled a battered telescope from the laced leather case that rode the left skirt of his saddle and the sun threw warm lights off the brass binding as he slid it home to his eye.

Clay Tolson, the big cowman of Big Valley, was sided by a rider strange to Johnny. Swinging the glass toward the corral behind them, Johnny saw the dun horse inside it and the three together explained the tracks he had followed. The two men turned back to meet him as Johnny replaced the glass and kneed Rowdy down the slope.

Johnny's eyes caressed the natural meadow of the basin as he rode and his toes twitched inside his narrow boots with satisfaction. At the head of the basin, a one-room cabin of flat stones snuggled into the slope. Below it, a small log barn was handy to the big corral and the shed roof on four posts that covered forge and anvil. The remnant of a brown-crusted, breadloaf haystack squatted in the meadow. All these bore witness to Johnny's calluses since he had bought the basin from Jim Skippworth.

Jim Skipp had homesteaded it for a summer cow camp, when the West was new, and he had homesteaded it for one good reason. The tiny silver ribbon, one mouse jump wide and two trout deep, that meandered down the basin controlled all the grazing on the benches north and south with the sure grip of the only living water. Johnny Money had made the basin what it was: the $ iron home ranch—his ranch, as compact and sturdy as the man himself, a place sheltered from winter storms, a one-man horse spread sufficient unto itself and the man who owned it.

Chapter Two

Tolson of the TC's

JOHNNY jogged up the basin floor to meet his visitors by the corral gate and Tolson's voice boomed out at him.

"Morning, Money," he called genially. "You must've got up before breakfast."

"I ain't no cow king like you," said Johnny gaily. "My brood mares had to get down the south bench 'fore th' seeps dried up. An' you know somethin'?—there wasn't nobody to do it but me."

"I brought a horse up to have bitted and reined," said Tolson in reply. "That's another thing can't nobody do like you. Give you a chance to add my iron to that brag board up there." He jerked his head a little disdainfully at the smooth pine plank that swung between the gateposts.

Johnny nodded as his eyes followed Tolson's head motion. Burned into the soft wood were irons that ran from the S Wrench up Malhewie way to the JFD down in Carson Valley. Johnny

Money had a way with horses that had kept him eating while he built up his own band of speckled ponies into a herd big enough to keep him. There was nothing unusual in Clay Tolson's bringing up a horse to be bridle-wised.

What was unusual to Johnny, and always had been, was Tolson's voice—a strong, smooth voice with a touch of arrogance around the edges all the time. It always seemed too highly polished for the barrel-bodied, spindling-shanked man with the blank, black eyes and the cast to his skin that sparked his unused nickname of *Tulare*. That was where he hailed from, and his mother had been a daughter of California proper, the Spanish California. Tolson was just a little touchy about his mixed blood and had never admitted it until he got so big that no one cared to twit him about it or to use his nickname.

"I guess I got room up there for th' TC," said Johnny finally. "Your money's good as th' next man's. You know what I charge?"

"I never paid that price before," said Tolson with a grin, "but this dun's worth more'n that if you do him *right*."

"I'll do my best," said Johnny, "an' if that ain't good enough you better take him back now. Same if you think my price is too high. You wait a minnit an' we'll see if he's worth messin' with."

"Can't watch the fun this morning," said Tolson crisply. "The boys shoved a herd off my North Ranch to fill a contract at Fort Bidwell. Bringing the stuff through the winter on lucerne and grain hay makes a government contract good business. I sell by the pound and not by the head, way your Big Valley ranchers used to."

Johnny bobbed his head. There was plenty of truth in what Tolson said, but his mind was busy with another thought.

"If you brung a raw bronc up here, Tolson, th' price goes up," said Johnny thoughtfully. "You can hire a stomper lot's cheaper'n you can me."

"That dun won't pitch one jump," said Tolson flatly. "At least, that's what his owner said when I bought him." He inclined his head toward the silent stranger beside him. "But what *you* charge ought to cover a crow hop or two," he added, chuckling.

"It don't," Johnny made pointed answer. "You're payin' me for mebbe knowin' more than the bronc an' for havin' more time for sure."

"Don't worry about him pitching," said Tolson easily. "I want him done right. You might as well make a roper out of him while you're at it."

"I don't rope-break 'cept for them few ropes like I do," said Johnny. "You'll hear from me when he's ready."

Johnny kneed Rowdy toward the corral gate only to halt again as Tolson kept up the conversation.

Chapter Three

Flare-up

"I SEE you're fixing to fence off the basin," said Tolson casually.

"When I gets th' wire, she's all done but th' stretchin'," grinned Johnny. "An' it otta be here 'most any day now. Skipp, he ordered it for me way 'long last winter."

"That makes it bad for me," said Tolson slowly. "I aimed to summer-graze some steers up here on the

benches and pay you for watering-rights. Not cheap pay, either."

"Le's wait 'til I gets her fenced 'fore we make th' dicker," said Johnny. "I don't want to have them steers eatin' up all of my winter hay crop in th' basin."

"Guess I'll have to if you put it that way," agreed Tolson amiably. "But don't take too long with that fencing. Those water fees'll help you pay for it."

"'Member them colts you tried t' dicker for last fall?" asked Johnny in a pleased tone.

"I'll still buy 'em," said Tolson quickly.

"Nope," Johnny said. "You got nothin' but money t' swap for 'em an' them Palouseyes is worth more'n money to them as knows horses. I got 'em runnin' on th' north bench, gettin' fat an' sassy. When th' wire comes, I swaps them colts for wire, posts, holes, an' all. Gettin' steer-waterin' money'll be like findin' raisins in th' biscuits."

"Sounds like you got it figured down to the last button," said Clay Tolson thoughtfully. "But you mind one thing sure. If your fence lines slop over onto public lands, I'll start cutting it faster'n you can string it," It wasn't a threat, just a promise.

"Don't fret yourself 'bout them lines," Johnny said quickly. "Shonchin an' his people dug them holes an' set th' posts right along th' rock piles that marked the government survey for Skipp's homestead." He grinned at Tolson with the calm confidence of a Christian holding four aces.

"Sounds like you played it safe and smart," Tolson said without heat. "I'd forgot this was a homestead patent to Skippworth first." His voice grew sarcastic. "Money, just why in hell does the sheriff keep that saloonkeeping, Indian-loving squawman on as deputy for Big Valley?"

"'Cause he savvies th' Modoc an' th' Modoc they savvy him," said Johnny sharply. "An' another thing, Tolson—" his voice got thicker and thicker as Tolson's sneering tone bit home—"Miss-is Skipp may be all Modoc an' their girl just half an' half, but they're proud of it an' so was she last time I seen her, which is more'n you are, *Tulare*. You *cuidado mucho* what you say 'bout Skipp an' his folks where I can hear it."

Tolson's heavy face swelled a little at the nickname and Johnny's cowpen Spanish, but it only showed amused wonder at Johnny's vehemence. The rider beside him shifted slightly in his saddle and straightened his right leg.

"Yuh talk some waspy fo' an' overgrowed button," he said tonelessly.

Johnny's eyes clouded up like purple thunderheads but he remembered to keep his hands braced on the saddle horn as he kneed Rowdy around so the tensed rider could see the carbine under his off *rosadero*.

"I only carries Old Reality under my leg for coyotes, lofers, an' camp meat," said Johnny hotly, "but if you want to augur, I'll climb off an' 'commodate you here an' now." His voice held a bite like January wind.

The stranger started to unbuckle his belt but Tolson's voice, smooth as sour-mash whisky, cut him short.

"Selling me a horse isn't reason to pick a fight for me I don't want," he said roughly.

"Allus likes t' he'p them as he'p me," said the rider flatly. "Yuh buyin' dunny means th' diff'runce 'tween meat in th' pot an' jus' flouah gravy on m' way t' Orygon."

"When I need help I can ask it," Tolson said harshly. "Sorry I raised your hackles, Money," he said to Johnny. "Forget it, will you? I'll know better next time." His voice held a pleasant sincerity and Johnny's face showed a little sheepishness.

"I ain't sayin' you got to like Jim Skipp," admitted Johnny, trying to be fair. "Just don't run him down to me. Which way you headin'?"

"Going down over the north rim by the old Cedar Pass trail," said Tolson. "It'll put me in the valley about where the Bidwell herd ought to be and let me check it." He nodded toward the rider. "Give him a start, wherever he's going."

"I got the trail gap plugged with poles," said Johnny, "even if it is public domain. Put 'em back when you goes through, will you? I surelee don't want them colts t' stray offen th' bench."

Tolson nodded and lifted his reins as Johnny swung down and looped Rowdy's *mecate* to a corral post. The two men racked away from the corral and the little morning wind that came whispering up the basin blurred their voices as the rider looked sidewise at Tolson.

"They wuz two of us fo'h witness thet he grabbed his rifle fust," he said with his thin lips twitching.

"You got paid for what I could use," snapped Tolson, "and blood or bullets was not in the deal. You high-line drifters are all the same—shoot first and then run. Look across there if you want to see what gunplay would have got me."

He nodded across the basin where a line of pack jacks and two riders followed the Big Valley trail into the basin. The rider shrugged his shoulders and went silent as they rode swiftly up the bench.

Chapter Four

Moccasin White Man

STRIPPING his gear off Rowdy, Johnny carried it inside the corral. The dun horse didn't snort or fight the line at Johnny's entry; he just switched flies and watched Johnny from half-shut eyes. Johnny fished in his right vest pocket for the makings and built a smoke while he studied the dun—a chunky animal with black zebra-striped forelegs and a broad black band down his spine—"the breed that never dies." So intense was his concentration that Rowdy's little whinny of greeting as a mare mule pulled up to the corral went unnoticed.

The mule's rider looked into the corral at Johnny's preoccupied figure for a long minute before he swung down and pigeon-toed silently over to the gate.

"Aimin' t' ride him from thar?" came his high-pitched growl.

Johnny made a jumping turn, dropping his cigarette, to face his questioner with a startled frown on his face.

From head to foot, the newcomer looked like a working cowman, but his feet wore soft moccasins and a tarnished star hung haphazardly on his shiny black vest. His pointed, grizzled face was split in an ear-reaching grin and his pale eyes glittered with amusement above the top bar of the gate.

Johnny's frown faded into an impish grin as he stepped quickly toward Jim Skippworth, who owned The Blue

Ruin, Summit's only store-saloon, and was the only man in Big Valley Clay Tolson hadn't bought or beat down.

"Dammif you don't look like a badger that growed straight up," Johnny chipped at him. "Big Valley get too crowded for you?"

Skipp ignored the taunt and jerked his head toward the flat above the corral where a squat, thick figure was unloading silvery spools from the pack jacks.

"Yore wahr come las' week," said Skipp. "Got tahrd seein' it lay aroun', so me'n' Tom Boston brang it up." The ex-trapper, who had turned cowman then merchant with better luck on each switch, eyed Johnny with a quizzical eye.

"Surelee saves me a trip, a'right," Johnny said slowly, "but dammit, Skipp, you knowed I aimed t' have them colts down there 'fore I took th' wire."

"Figgered yu'd say that," said Skipp calmly. "Ain't yu th' ongrateful cuss!"

"No I ain't," Johnny snapped back. "Them colts pays you for th' wire an' pays your Modoc friends for diggin' holes an' plantin' posts. I'd feel better 'bout that wire bein' here if it was mine plumb paid for."

Skipp pulled a battered twist of black tobacco from his shirt front, gnawed off a corner, and replaced the twist where it would keep soft before he replied.

"Yu got idees of honesty what's plumb painful t' watch," he grunted. " 'Sides which't, yu makes me out better'n I am."

Johnny snorted at him.

"Waal, yu do," said Skipp placidly. "Bringin' that wahr up hyar, I gets t' leave m' pack jacks on yore feed, which is some cheaper'n feedin' mine to 'em." He spat judiciously downwind.

"Keepin' them jacks on my feed still don't pay for that wire an' such," said Johnny stubbornly.

"Effen I ain't worried, don' see why yu air," grunted Skipp. "I'll draw me some pickchures on th' store wall so's I know what yu owe fer."

"Last time you done that," Johnny said, grinning, "I got me a small grindstone, an' when we come t' settle up, you charged me for twelve pounds of cheese."

"Got t' git hit someways," agreed Skipp. "They's a handy passage 'twixt store an' bar, but yu don' drop nothin' on th' planks. Effen yore goin' t' fret 'bout owin' me fer wahr an' sichlike, Tom Boston kin c'lleck them colts right now an' we'll take 'em down when we goes."

"Suits me fine," Johnny said quickly, "but who in hell is Tom Boston? 'Nother of your Modoc in-laws got tired singin' agency psalms for his treaty grub?"

"Yu'll know him when yu sees him." Skipp bobbed his head for emphasis. "He's Shonchin's onlucky son, th' one got sent t' Black Robe school."

"His name wasn't no Tom Boston when I knowed him," said Johnny firmly. "He get religion an' change his name?"

"Not him," said Skipp. "Th' shaveheads jus' had t' give him a name they could wrangle 'thout stranglin' theyselves. Him an' Jodey come down from school t'gither. Shonchin wuz camped at Dorris Crossin' makin' meat but Tom, he sided Jodey on down home."

"Josey's back a'ready, is she?" asked Johnny idly, remembering a thin, wiry figure with black eyes like dinner plates who had needed hog-tying to get her off to the mission school three

years before. He remembered, too, that Skipp had never called his only child by the feminine Josette that was her name.

"She's back an' she's some onsettlin'," said Skipp slyly. "She's bin askin' whar yu wuz."

"She allus did get your feathers ruffled," said Johnny, remembering Skipp's frenzy when she used his cutting horses for dragging wood or running races with her playmates.

"She'll raise *yore* hackles," said Skipp dryly.

"I'll take that chancet," Johnny said absently; "her an' me allus got on real well. I got me a ride comin' first." He motioned toward the dun behind him.

Chapter Five

The Devil Is a Dun Horse

"WHO'S payin' fer what yu thinks yu know this time?" asked Skipp, watching the dun with narrowed eyes.

"Tolson brought him up this mornin'," said Johnny, stripping his telescope and rifle off the saddle and laying them against the corral. "First one of his I've handled."

"I figgered Tolson for one of them I seen foggin' acrost th' north bench," Skipp growled, "an' when I smelt varmint aroun' hyar I knowed it. He tell yu yore wahr wuz to Summit?"

Johnny shook his head. "Guess he didn't think of it. He had a trail herd for Bidwell on his mind."

"Sometimes I don' figger yu got good sense," grunted Skipp. "Yu mind what happent t' them in Big Valley what Tolson started doin' friendly business with? They got honeyswoggled like a bullsnake swallows bird aigs."

"I'll make out t' handle him or any coin he wants t' pay," said Johnny carelessly. "I ain't got nothin' he wants 'cept them colts an' he knows they ain't for sale. 'Sides, if you an' me don't quit makin' chin music, that dun'll think we're human." He hefted his saddle up and walked toward the waiting horse.

"'Fore yu rushes off," said Skipp, "whar'll I tell Tom Boston t' put them long-ears?"

"Turn 'em in on what's left of my haystack," said Johnny over his shoulder.

Skipp yelled these instructions to Tom Boston and climbed up on the top gate bar, where he folded himself like a carpenter's rule and took a fresh chew off his twist. His pale eyes softened as he watched Johnny's cat-sure movements around the horse, and for a heartbeat the years and the weather left his face no older than that of Johnny Money who was young enough to be the son he had never had.

The zebra dun didn't boggle as Johnny slowly worked *bosal* and blinds into place and made them fast with the theodore rope. Even when Johnny sacked him out with a saddle blanket he didn't strike or act skittish. He didn't do more than hump his back when the heavy saddle slid gently aboard and the hump was gone before Johnny got the cinch tight. Johnny left him to soak a little under the saddle while he walked over to the gate and built a smoke.

"Got him figgered, Skipp?" he asked, looking up and letting the smoke drift from his nostrils.

"Hosses air jus' like humans," said Skipp. "Yu cain't tell what they air

from th' way they acks."

"He's been mustanged a'right," said Johnny seriously; "th' damper slits in his nose proves that. But they's hackamore sign on his nose an' Tolson said he didn't pitch, meanin' he's no outlaw, I guess."

"Ain't but one way I knows t' prove Tolson a liar er not," Skipp said dryly.

Johnny grinned up at Skipp's tart tone and pulled his hat down with an instinctive gesture. He started for the dun, hitching up his leggings, just as Tom Boston climbed up on the gate bars beside Jim Skippworth, for all the world like a bear climbing a scaly-barked pine.

The dun only cocked his ears when Johnny loosed the snubbing rope and flowed into the saddle. He didn't move when Johnny raised the blinds, but when Johnny urged him with his knees, head and neck lunged level with his backbone.

His mighty hindquarters gathered, bunched, and exploded straight for the corral pickets. One forward thrust, another and another, and Johnny saw it coming—a stampeder who would kill himself to get the man on top.

Tom Boston saw it coming, too. He dragged his hogleg free and laid it across his arm for a steady rest. Skipp knocked it up with a curt, "Yu cain't make hit shore," without taking his eyes off the scene below.

Johnny's hat was in his hand when the third jump closed the distance to the pickets. As the dun started his final plunge, Johnny clapped his hat over the dun's right eye and swung his right leg up and back, riding loose as the dun crashed broadside into the stout juniper posts.

Johnny lit in a sprawling heap and pitched over onto his face. The dun pivoted and his slashing forefeet glanced off Johnny's heavy leggings. Johnny half rose and stumbled groggily.

The dun was in the air, striking down again with a whistling rage, when Tom Boston's gun bucked in his hand. The dun gave a convulsive lunge and buckled in a heap. He threshed once, his head crashing against Johnny's right arm, and lay still in a halo of dust.

Johnny got his feet under him and came up wobbly as a new calf, shaking his head and sneezing violently as the acrid dust bit home.

"He damn shure didn't pitch none," said Johnny wryly, hobbling toward the gate. "Who popped that cap?"

Skipp jerked his head toward Tom Boston busily shoving a fresh shell into the cylinder.

"I owe you a day in harvest, Tom," Johnny said warmly.

"Not 'nuff, Junny," said Tom Boston, shaking his head and grinning broadly. "I think one Palouseye colt mekkit square." His teeth flashed in the sunlight.

"Y'ain't wuth it," grunted Skipp, looking down his nose. "See effen yo're bad hurt 'fore yu pays thet price."

Johnny shook his arms and legs experimentally and grinned warmly up at the two gate roosters.

"Nothin' permanent," he said, "which'll make you buzzards unhappy, th' way you acts." He grimaced as his pants scraped against raw flesh where the dun's feet had slipped. "But I'm goin' to be sorer than a fool hen layin' square eggs. An' this arm's surelee goin' to put a crimp in my fence-stringin'."

He hooked his swelling right arm into his shirt front and leaned against the pickets to make a smoke with his

good hand.

"Lemme see thet arm," said Skipp, levering himself off the gate in sections. He probed down it with strong, gnarled fingers and little beads of sweat popped out on Johnny's forehead.

"It ain't broke," he said finally, managing to sound regretful.

"Now ain't that just pure hell," said Johnny weakly. "You want I should try him again an' do better?" He sucked deeply on his curly and let the smoke hang in his throat.

"'Fore yu do anythin' else foolish, yu come down t' Summit an' let Miz Skipp plaster a poultice on hit," said Skipp. "Yu kin see Jodey whilst she does hit."

Tom Boston flicked his eyes at Johnny at the mention of Josette's name, while his face stayed blank as a boot sole. Johnny didn't see the look. He was busy thinking about his next move.

Chapter Six

Blind As a Snubbing-Post

"MIGHT as well, I guess," said Johnny to Skipp, when he'd thought it out. "We can pick up them colts on th' way down."

"Y'ain't in no shape t' wrangle colts," said Skipp roughly.

"Don't have to wrangle 'em," spluttered Johnny. "Just show up an' they come a'runnin'. Follow you like dogs if you don't speak to them about it. They been my pets all winter."

"I don' care effen they shakes hands an' speaks Siwash," said Skipp dogmatically. "Tom kin haze 'em down fer yu. Whar they runnin', so's he don' wander all over hell's creation huntin' 'em?"

"They're up on th' north bench," said Johnny, shifting his arm to ease the throbbing pain. He looked at Tom Boston. "You're ridin' for me if you do it, Tom," he said. "An' you can stretch wire for me if you got nothin' better in sight. Twenty dollars a month, an' I'll pound steeples an' do th' cookin'."

"Take fifteen an' do yore own cookin', Tom," growled Skipp. "Johnny's doughgods run two fer a pound."

"Quit lyin' 'bout me," said Johnny, trying to match Skipp's banter. "How 'bout it, Tom?"

"Sure, Junny," was Tom's way of saying he had hired out. He cinched up his pony and jogged stolidly up and out of the basin to the north.

"He shore ain't spoiled none," said Skipp approvingly, "even if he has been t' school an' his folks is plumb rich, th' way Modocs figger sich."

"Ne'mind braggin' him up," said Johnny. "I know he can shoot an' that's enuff for now. I'll slap my saddle onto Rowdy an' we'll get goin'."

"Yo're too goddam stubborn t' ask fer holp," said Skipp, "so stay outten m' way whilst I do hit 'thout bein' asked. Yu let that arm rest, an' yore tongue too."

They lined out of the basin on the Big Valley trail with Skipp in the lead, and brass drops on his spurs making little tinkling sounds that matched his bit chains. They rode in companionable silence, the way they had for several years after Johnny Money first drifted into Big Valley—just a high-lonesome kid smelling the wind and riding into it to see where it started from—and hit Jim Skippworth for a job.

Where the trail pitched over the rimrock Skipp pulled up and Johnny stopped beside him. They sat still, looking out into the golden distance, and Johnny automatically reached for his tobacco sack.

Two steep stairstep *rincons* below the rim, the tiny settlement of Summit was marked by poplar spires, their leaves twisting in the light like quaking asp. Big Valley ran north from Summit, parallel to the bench, in a broad rolling trough with the silver thread of Pitt River sparkling up its middle in irregular loops. Beyond the valley, broken, blunted ridges and lava prairies lifted slowly to the western sky line, where the high Sierra peaks flaunted snowplumes like the feathers of hostile war bonnets. This was California east of the mountains, the land that valley Californios dismissed as being "fine for men and dogs but hell on wimmen and parsons."

"Makes a man feel plumb nonsensical," said Johnny finally.

Skipp spat expertly on an unwary lizard and wiped his mouth with an automatic sleeve.

"Useliss as tits on a boar," he admitted gruffly. "She wuz a mighty fine big lonesome land oncet." There was an indefinable regret in his voice that Johnny didn't quite understand.

"What's eatin' you?" he demanded.

"Yu harken back t' what she wuz when yu fust rode into Big Valley," said Skipp, shifting his chew so he could talk around it. "They wuz lots of famblies down thar, each with they own piece of meadowland an' a little bunch of cows in the breaks and benches. Wuzn't nobody hoggin' nothin', an' even atter yu come along, wuzn't nobody stealin' from one 'nother no more than wuz neighborly."

Johnny was surprised at the vehemence in Skipp's voice and looked out across Big Valley while he thought about it.

"Now she ain't that way," said Skipp without looking at Johnny, seeming to talk to himself. "Them famblies is either workin' fer one man er they owes him money, which is worse. Thet valley ain't a livin' place no more, hits jus' a place fer cow raisin' an' money lovin'."

He emptied his mouth in an explosive *whoosh* that made a misty rainbow tinged with brown around his mule's ears.

Johnny watched Skipp's face and the beginnings of a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth and brought dancing lights into his eyes.

"Just 'cause you don't like them roan Durhams he raises that packs tallow clear to th' hocks an' makes him money don't raise no boils on my backside," he chipped, to see what would happen. "Long's Tolson leaves me be, I ain't worryin' how big he's got."

"Yu wuzn't worried none 'bout thet zebra dun twell yu forked him, neither," said Skipp acidly. "Yu ain't got Tolson cased no better if yu ain't worried. A man ain't like a mule, Johnny," he went on patiently, "when hit comes t' feedin' his wallet. He's more like a hoss. He don' know when he's got all he needs an' sometimes he'll tromp yu t' git more."

"You're a suspicious, mule-lovin' old tomcat," said Johnny.

"Shore," agreed Skipp, "both ways from th' jack. But effen yu winds up workin' fer Tolson 'stid of bein' yore own boss, don't come meowin' around to me."

"Don't lose no sleep worryin'," said

Johnny, irritated at Skipp's lecturing tone. "Tolson's got all he needs right now."

"Yu come right close t' bein' blind as a snubbin'-post," rasped Skipp. "It ain't what he's got now thet counts with him. It's what he might hev effen he got it all. An' th' water in yore basin means summer-grazin' he ain't got."

"You done lived with 'em so long you think plumb Injun," said Johnny with a grin.

Skipp knew Johnny's teasing ways and he knew the only way to stop him was to hit his weak spot.

"Yu better git married," he growled, "so's yu'll hev somethin' t' think about sides yoreself. Hit might wake yu up."

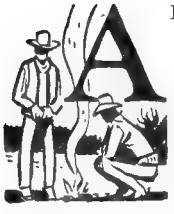
"Hunh-unh!" snorted Johnny, "not 'til I finds one looks pretty as a Palouse-eye mare with a foal in her belly, an' don't talk no more'n they do."

"I shore want t' be around when th' lightnin' strikes," Skipp said slyly.

Johnny was about to make a quick retort when a wink of sunlight on the north bench far across the basin caught his eye. He reached for his long glass and swore feelingly when he didn't find it.

Chapter Seven

The Jaws of the Trap



RM hurt?" asked Skipp in mock solicitude at Johnny's exclamation.

"No, dammit," yelped Johnny, "but next time you stable-hand for me, ask me if you got everything where it belongs 'fore we gallop an' ride. My glass is back t' th' corral."

"Yu got yore rifle," retorted Skipp. "What d' yu need old see-far fer? Lookin' fer a wife?"

"Quit yammerin'," snapped Johnny, "an' look over there for what's causin' them sun flashes." He waved his banged-up arm for direction and swore again.

Skipp looked quickly across the basin to the north bench. "Hell's delight, Johnny, hit's only Tom Boston nudgin' his pony whar th' colt sucks. He's headin' fer th' trail gap an' now he's dropped into thet swale leadin' to it."

"Ain't that just like a warhoop," howled Johnny. "Chousin' gentle stock when he don't have to. I'll rim him out for sure when I see him." He almost danced in his saddle with exasperation.

Skipp took his time replying to Johnny's anxious tone. His frosty eyes had spotted a faint dust haze, distinct from the spaced puffles of Tom Boston's passage, rising above the little swale that dropped toward the rim. His eyes were narrowed thoughtfully when he opened his mouth.

"Waal, Tom now, he ain't ez old an' sober-sided ez yu," he said soothingly, his eyes on Johnny's crippled arm. "Le's git alang." He thumped his mule forward.

"You go ahead," said Johnny nervously. "I got to get that glass 'fore some pack rat leaves me nothin' but dry elk sign for it." He wheeled Rowdy onto the back trail and his jaw set stubbornly.

"Yu git thet arm plastered 'fore hit swoles up like a pan of light bread," said Skipp, almost pleadingly. "Ain't no pack rat big enough t' wrangle that look-today-see-tomorrow outfit."

"Nunh-unh!" said Johnny quickly. "Missis Skipp'll have time t' get her fixin's ready 'fore I gets there. You go

'head." He pulled his hat down with a jerk.

Skipp saw the action and the set of Johnny's jaw. The boy's stiff-necked independence irritated him.

"Dammif y'ain't ornerier then a psalm-shoutin' Campbellite," he growled in his beard. "Makes hit hard t' holp yu, Johnny."

"I been weaned an' shed my milk teeth," said Johnny shortly. "Tell Missis Skipp I'll be there pretty quick. An 'tell Josey not t' play no tricks on me."

"I cain't argy with yu when yu got th' bit in yore teeth," said Skipp. "But don' yu go projeckin' aroun' lookin' fer trouble. Not with thet arm way hit is. Yu git thet glass an' come a'runnin'. Hyar me?"

Johnny lifted his bridle hand in salute and raised Rowdy into a ground-eating trot with a spurless heel.

Skipp's pale eyes showed all their years as he watched Johnny's retreating figure for a moment and then swung his gaze to the dust haze on the north bench. It was even fainter now and it disappeared entirely as he watched—the way dust from a moving herd fades away when the cattle are let fan out to graze. Skipp nodded to himself and his nose hobnobbed with his chin over the egg-sized quid in his jaw.

The sun topped the height of the day and started down the slant of afternoon and Skipp's mule pricked up her ears. A horse and rider topped out on the bench across the basin and jogged steadily up it toward the other, unused trail to Big Valley.

Skipp's eyes were heavy with unspoken thoughts as he watched Johnny's headstrong progress. He spat once and eased down the trail to Summit.

The sun poised for an instant on the Sierra peaks and disappeared. Long purple shadows crept down the slopes of the Warrens, raced across the benchland and plunged Big Valley into velvet darkness. The lamps of Summit winked warmly through the night as Johnny came singlefooting down the road into Summit and pulled up before The Blue Ruin.

The store side of Skipp's long, low log building was dark but mellow, yellow light poured out of the small window that marked the saloon. Hipshot horses lined the hitchrail, and Tolson's big gelding was among them.

Johnny tied Rowdy at the end of the line, a little apart from the others, with a slip knot in the *mecate;* a long knot that let the trigger end wrap around the saddle horn where a man wouldn't fumble finding it in a hurry. Then, hooking his right hand high up in his shirt front to ease the pain, he walked stiff-kneed around the corner of the building to find Jim Skippworth.

Skipp was all alone in front of the canvas and brush shelters that made his summer quarters as Johnny circled the glowing fire pit toward him.

"Miz Skipp got tahrd waitin'," he said brusquely, as Johnny sat tailor-fashion beside him. "Jodey's made thet poultice so many times th' yarbs is plumb tuckered out." He cased Johnny's dangling shirt tail and the sweat rings under his arms. "Whar in Toph-et yu bin?"

"I been jobbed an' I been unjobbin' myself," said Johnny angrily. "That dun horse of Tolson's an' that beef-herd-for-Fort-Bidwell talk was just foofarraw t' keep me busy while his hands crowded a bunch of his square-butt steers up on the north bench to eat me out 'fore th' wire was strung."

He gritted his teeth at the memory of Tolson's smooth voice patting him on the back and playing him along in front of the corral. "Time I got them steers shoved down off th' bench again an' th' gap closed up like it was, I couldn't read no sign of Tom Boston nor them colts. But by God, them steers lost plenty of tallow 'fore I finished with 'em. Tolson won't make no gain on them this year. Where is that Tom Boston?"

Skipp's pointed face wrinkled into whiskery folds. "Lost aplenty tallow, did they?" he said sourly, ignoring Johnny's question. "Sometimes I wonder if yu got th' sense God gave a sagehen." He drowned a moth miller that was flirting with the fire coals.

"Yes, by God, they did!" snapped Johnny, hotting up at Skipp's tone. "If you think I'm settin' on my britches an' gettin' grazed out 'fore my fence is up, you're crazier than I am!"

"I ain't, an' yu air," said Skipp gruffly, almost fiercely. "Effen yore haid wuzn't pompkin-hollow, yu'd 'a' come down hyar an' tolt me 'bout it. We'd 'a' raised a smoke an' got enough of my in-laws t' string thet north fence in three-four days an' yu couldn't be grazed out in thet time. Soon's yu fence off thet water, Tolson's got t' move his stock. As 'tis, yu done laid yoreself open like a busted flush." He spat his old quid into the coals and gnawed off a fresh charge.

"If I can't handle my own work, it's time I quit," Johnny said stiffly. "'Sides which, I got the right to protect myself."

"Shore," said Skipp, grinding the fresh tobacco into pulp. "An' yu got th' right t' play smack into Tolson's hands, y' idjit!"

"Bedamned if I did," Johnny stormed. "He can't run over my basin 'thout permission."

"He ain't," Skipp said with fatherly exasperation. "Tolson's runnin' on public lands. Effen y'ain't got th' basin fenced, it's not his fault effen his steers don' know th' diffrunce 'tween Uncle's land an' yores. An' effen y'ain't fenced, yu got no call t' holler 'trespass.' Thet's Californy law, an' Tolson he knows it. Soon's he finds out 'bout them steers, yu'll wear yore britches out forkin' a courthouse bench."

He stopped short and raised his voice. "Trot out thet poultice, Jodey," he rumbled over his shoulder, "'fore he gits away an' starts thinkin' fer hisself ag'in!"

Chapter Eight

Josette's Growed Up!

"THAT poultice can wait," Johnny snapped curtly, not hearing the skirt rustle behind him. "Loan me your pistol—I aim to show that half-breed Tolson he can't rough-lock me."

"The only thing that will wait is you and your 'half-breed Tolson'," said a low, rich voice on Johnny's right. "I've been up to my elbows in poultice all afternoon and I will not waste it."

"Don't start pesterin' me a'ready, Josey," barked Johnny fretfully. He turned his head and the rest of his words died in his throat.

The girl who knelt beside him, her dark skirt billowing out like a mushroom, was nothing like the thin, wiry, pigtailed figure Johnny carried in his mind as Josette Skippworth. Only her eyes were familiar: two deep pools where fire embers glowed.

"Well, Mr. Money," laughed Josette, "don't sit there with your eyes bugged out."

She leaned over and lifted his arm with long tapering fingers and the blood pounded up Johnny's neck as her velvet blouse returned to rest below her throat. Apparently oblivious to Johnny's pulse rate, Josette expertly bound the poultice into place with a clean flour sack. Johnny watched her in stunned surprise and jumped involuntarily when she spoke.

"You look like a stepped-on toad," she said impishly. "After three years, you ought to do more than gawk like a wooden Indian. Tom Boston is better company." She smiled sweetly at his discomfiture.

"You—you've filled out—all over, Josey," stammered Johnny. "I mean you've growed up," he finished hastily.

"They taught us at the mission that a young lady was always addressed as Miss," said Josette Skippworth. She tossed her head in the old wilful way that Johnny remembered so well.

"Miss Josette," said Johnny slowly as his mind rocked off dead center. "Miss Josette Skippworth," he repeated, as if savoring the sound. "Miss Josette," he said again, "didn't they teach you at the mission to be respectful to older folks?"

"You're just old enough to take your arm back," said Josette firmly. She lifted it off her lap and swayed forward to lay it across Johnny's legs. Her square-cut blouse drew Johnny's eyes like a magnet and Josette saw it.

"And you're old enough to keep your eyes to yourself, Johnny Money," she said crisply. There was no self-consciousness or false modesty in her voice.

Johnny flushed under his dusty tan and turned toward Skipp just in time to catch the cat grin on his face before a noise in the night claimed Skipp's attention. Skipp whistled like a marsh hawk and Tom Boston materialized out of the darkness, leaving his jaded pony at the edge of the firelight while he walked over to sit on his heels beside Josette.

"I tolt yu she wuz onsettlin'," Skipp said dryly and Johnny, feeling baffled at every turn, swung around to ask the Modoc about the colts.

Tom was filling a stubby, iron-bowled pipe that spoke highly of much use and strong tobacco. While he tamped the coarse cut-plug home, he spoke to Josette in her mother tongue and she answered in it.

There was an easy familiarity in their talk that made Johnny stir uneasily. He forgot about the colts and his face showed deep relief when Skipp intervened.

"Jodey—an' yu, Tom!" Skipp ordered flatly, "stop hit now. Yu both speaks better English than me er Johnny."

"Tom's asking me some questions, Dad," Josette pouted; "private questions. You'll hear them when it's time, and they certainly are no concern of Mr. Money's. He has 'half-breed' troubles already, or so he said." She tossed her head again and in the glow of the fire pit, the lines of her jaw and throat seemed to Johnny as clean and lovely as a young filly's.

Johnny wanted to bite his tongue off. His anger at Clay Tolson got a fresh start because of the phrase he had used on Tolson where Josette could hear it.

"Where's that pistol I asked you for?" he said sharply, turning toward Skipp.

"Whar hit stays," said Skipp quietly, hitching his holster squarely into his lap. "I ain't holpin' yu kill yoreself."

"Step to hell, then," Johnny said thickly. "I still got my rifle."

He rose to his feet, not noticing that Josette rose beside him, as slim and lovely as a budding willow shoot, her hair making a glossy, black cloud down her back.

Skipp's only reaction was to move his jaws a little faster and flick a warning glance at Tom Boston, who settled back on his heels. Johnny caught the shift of Skipp's eyes in the fireshine and suddenly remembered his colts.

"You get 'em down a'right?" he snapped at Tom as he turned.

Tom Boston shook his head. "No colts, Junny," he said.

Johnny's face was a study in perplexity.

"What d' you mean, no colts?" he snarled. "Can't you read sign?"

"Sure, Junny," said Tom Boston, "but got to find it before read it. Too many steer tracks in trail cover sign where colts went down. Cut li'l sign headin' up valley but have to quit when dark come. Colts was bein'—" he stopped quickly as Skipp raised a warning hand behind Johnny's back, and sucked hungrily on his pipe.

"That goddam half—" Johnny checked himself. "That Tolson must've left them poles down t' make it easier to get his steers up the trail an' them colts followed him down. We got to hunt horse tomorrow, 'stead of fencin'." He pulled his hat down with a jerk and wheeled slowly around the fire pit.

Tom Boston spoke quickly to Skipp in choking gutturals, a note of pleading urgency in his voice. Skipp looked at Johnny's set jaw and shook his head but Tom's words seemed to trip a coiled spring inside Josette. She began gathering pitch knots, and juniper limbs, her swirling skirt making a little breath of pungent dust, and her voice was sharp when she threw it at Tom Boston.

"Holt on, Johnny," Skipp called softly.

Johnny turned without seeming to notice Josette's actions or that Tom was helping her.

"Well?" said Johnny, his voice bitter.

"They's other ways of comin' around Tolson," Skipp said wheedlingly. "I bin makin' medicine ag'in' him fer a long time, but she never looked right 'twell now. Untwist yore tail an' set a spell whilst we turns th' case kyard. Don' spoil it with no kid play."

"I told you oncet I was weaned," said Johnny hotly. "I can kill my own snakes. Even if I can't speak Modoc." He raked Josette with an angry look without realizing it.

"If you had ever bothered to learn anything you wouldn't be ramping off like a locoed elk," she stormed right back at him. "You—you—you white man!" She stamped her foot.

Johnny stared at her dumbly while Tom Boston carefully piled fresh wood on the fire and fanned the embers with his hat until a pitch knot flared into sudden flame. Josette's face stood out in clear relief, a mixture of fear and anger and something else flowing across it in rippling waves.

All Johnny saw was her anger and the rounded slimness of her body and the squat figure of Tom Boston feeding the fire. He turned on his heel and stalked toward The Blue Ruin with-

out a backward glance.

Johnny walked steadily around the dark outline of the building just as the fire behind him broke into staccato bursts of flame. A tiny pin point of answering light winked back from a jutting bench far to the north and west but Johnny couldn't see it. He was pulling his carbine out of the saddle boot and levering a shell into the chamber.

The fire bursts made Skipp's face crinkle like a fresh waffle. His frosty eyes were bright and feral as he left Josette and Tom Boston to tend the fire and headed for the back door of his store establishment.

Chapter Nine

Tolson Holds High Cards

HIS boot heels thumped solidly on the puncheon floor as Johnny almost ran through the door into The Blue Ruin. A coiled spring in his belly began wrapping tighter and tighter as he spotted Tolson and headed for him.

Tolson was leaned back against the bar, one boot heel braced behind him, and the heavy belt across his waist was taut from the pressure of his stomach. A little knot of Big Valley men lined the bar below him.

"Have a toddy on me, Money," he hailed heartily, his face breaking into a mirthless grin as Johnny crossed the floor. His gambler's eyes were cold and wary.

Johnny did not answer until he stopped squarely in front of Tolson and stood his carbine against the bar.

"No likker, thanks," he said quickly. "I ain't used to drinkin' left-handed."

"What happened to you?" asked Tolson smoothly. "Shake hands with yourself too strong?" He looked at the men along the bar and they grinned appreciatively.

"No," Johnny said slowly, "no, not that. I got it from a dun horse that didn't pitch."

"By God, Money, I bought him on the say-so he didn't pitch," said Tolson quickly. "I'm sorry about that, real sorry."

He looked around the room and his audience nodded.

"Feel sorry for that dun horse," said Johnny slowly, spacing his words to keep his voice level. "I'm here with a gimpy arm, but that dun is layin' dead in my corral. I been wonderin' for some time if that's th' way you had it planned."

Tolson studied his accuser for a scant second before he answered.

"You set your price, Money," he said curtly, "and you take the risks that go with it. Don't let your crippled arm come out your mouth." His face showed nothing of his feelings but a big vein in his neck began to pulse and swell.

"*Mebbe*, just mebbe, you didn't know that dun was a stompeder," said Johnny. He paused to get his words right and then dropped them out with all his pent-up anger behind them. "But you done lied to me, Tolson—an' don't you never in your life lie to me again."

"Talk's cheap," said Tolson coldly. "But even crippled up, don't go too far with it."

"I'll go soda to hock with th' likes of you," raged Johnny, the memory of

that afternoon and Josette's words burning inside him. "You mealy-mouth me 'bout waterin'-fees an' say you'll wait 'til I gets fenced. Then I finds a bunch of your steers on th' bench 'fore you was well out of sight. I asks you decent t' put them poles back in th' gap so's my colts won't stray, an' them colts is gone. Well, your steers is off th' bench, an' they better stay off 'til th' wire's strung. I'll find them colts come daylight, an' they better not be hurt none. An' don't you crowd me no more—*Tulare* Tolson."

He stepped back a short step and his eyes were hot with anger and contempt.

Tolson's face was a mask of outraged innocence but the measure of his mind was in his voice.

"My stock has a right to open range," he said harshly, "and any man who can't keep track of his stuff better hire some hands to do it for him. You've made your play, Money, and I won't forget it."

His voice changed to a raking, mocking whip that lashed Johnny where it hurt. "You're a little man, Money, and you're crippled up, but a man always has to answer for his tongue regardless."

He looked at the others in the room and they nodded. Willingly or not, they nodded; Clay Tolson had them close-hobbled with wages and mortgages and the threat of foreclosure.

"Ain't no time like now," gritted Johnny, his eyes blurred with tears of scalding rage at Tolson's tone. "You watch my hands."

He grasped the bar edge with both hands, the poulticed arm sending licking tongues of pain under his armpit, and slid them down the plank until he stood with his rifle under his left hand.

"Grab th' bar an' turn loose your wolf," said Johnny grimly.

"Quit asking for it," snapped Tolson. "You know that pistol against rifle ain't a fair deal for me, and you crippled to boot."

"It is an' I ain't," barked Johnny sharply. "I got a shell in th' chamber to even up, an' you ain't watched me near as clost as you've watched what I owned. You see, Tolson—" he paused a heartbeat and spaced his words like a tolling bell— "I'm just—nacherally—left handed—you schemin'—dirty half-breed!"

Tolson's big hands grabbed the bar and his knuckles whitened. The barkeep dove for the sawdust and the onlookers hastily plastered themselves against the far wall with frantic scufflings.

The tension built up and up between the men until it charged the room like summer sky before the first lightning flash brings quick relief. Then the sound of a late rider passing down the street at a high trot filled the room with a muffled noise like clods thudding on a pine box.

The hoofbeats seemed to shatter Tolson's animal purpose, to snap him back into his normal calculating self. But they did not erase the cold hostility from his eyes, or the grim twist to his lips. His shoulders relaxed from their hunched position and his hands swung slowly down by his sides.

"Shoot off your mouth, Money," he said, "but I'm not playing your game. I lose either way. You kill me and I'm not around to enjoy what I've got in Big Valley. I kill you and there's not the satisfaction I'll get watching that squawman deputy serve a warrant on you for damaging my property by run-

ning them steers off open range. You don't know what being crowded is yet!"

There was no fear in Tolson's actions or voice; just a calculating, icy purpose and Johnny felt it. His face went bleak and the lines of sun and weather and recent pain were etched more deeply by disappointment. He had made the only play he knew to settle it once and for all with the man who had jobbed him so smoothly, and it hadn't worked. Tolson was still playing the game his way, holding the driver's seat, and Johnny knew he was sucking dust from a dry teat. He hooked his thumb back in his shirt front, trailing the rifle in his left hand, and headed for the door. Tolson watched him go with opaque, unwinking eyes.

Chapter Ten

Buckshot Means Buryin'!

JOHNNY was almost to the door when Jim Skippworth stepped loosely through the connecting passage from the store at the end of the bar with a Greener in his hands. A surprised murmur filled the room and Tolson half turned to see its cause, but Johnny kept right on for the door with hunched shoulders.

"Goin' somewhars, Johnny?" Skipp hailed.

Johnny wheeled sharply at the familiar voice, almost tripping himself.

"Horse huntin'," he snapped, wanting to feel Rowdy under him and the night wind beating in his face. He shifted his feet impatiently.

Skipp laid the shotgun on the bar and gnawed off a fresh mouthful of tobacco. He seemed to take forever with each movement but when he spoke it was so everyone in the room could hear him.

"Better wait twell mornin', Johnny," he said calmly. "Them strayed colts of yores wuz stole."

Johnny's mouth moved but nothing came out. Tolson leaned back against the bar and his face settled into an impassive mask.

"Don' trout-mouth me, boy," said Skipp. "They wuz stole real slick but yu don' hev t' worry none. Them speckled ponies'll be hyar, come good light."

He chewed happily for several seconds and aimed his next words at Clay Tolson.

"An' effen I wuz yu, Tolson, I'd be long gone 'fore they gits hyar," said Jim Skippworth. "Effen yu ain't, it won't make me mad none to 'rest yu fer grand theft—meanin' Money's colts. Effen yu' ain't hyar, won't nobody say a word, long's yu stay shet of Big Valley."

Johnny just stood there with his mouth open while the Big Valley men let their wind come out in a rasping sigh of relief. Only Clay Tolson seemed unmoved.

"You start playing God and it'll cost you more than you got, squawman," he said contemptuously and started for the door.

"Tolson," said Jim Skippworth in a voice as flat as a glacier lake, "I got ten blue whistlers in each bar'l of this squaw gun, an' buckshot means buryin' ev'y time." The snicking click of the hammers going back halted Tolson in his tracks. "Jus' look me in th' face," said Skipp, "whilst I tells yore forchune."

Tolson turned and his hands worked

convulsively at his sides, when he faced Skipp's frosty eyes.

"Man named Shonchin' an' his folks wuz camped 'bove Dorris Crossin' makin' meat," Skipp said acidly. "'Course, they wears clo's like whites now'days an' some of them's even learnt t' read an' cipher, but, Tolson, they's still Injin enough t' holp them ez holped them, meanin' me—squawman, yu named me. An' they's still savvy enough t' read fire talk. 'Fore they gits hyar, Tolson, thet jasper what wuz herdin' them stole colts'll hev his guts writ down in one of them copy books they gives out to th' Agency."

He paused and his eyes flickered like Northern Lights.

"Hits some tongue-loosenin', Tolson, t' hev a bunch of Modoc men strip down to they moccasins 'round a small fire whilst they prays to they skinnin' knives an' whittles pitch-pine splinters. A man might even recolleck what he knowed 'bout sellin' a stompedin' dun horse for a good price."

"I'll think it over," said Tolson slowly, playing his string clear down to the knot.

"Take long's yu want," said Skipp, his voice as cold as a well digger's hams—"'twixt now an' daylight. Thet's time enough t' pack yore thutty yars' gatherin'."

He peered down behind the bar and his lip twitched.

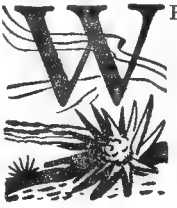
"Git offen th' floor 'fore yu roots through hit," he roared at the barkeep. "I'll buy a drink soon's Tolson makes up his mind."

"It's made up," said Clay Tolson. "But I remember a long time." There was the ruthless man's bitter hatred of defeat in his voice.

"Thet's fine," said Skipp pointedly. "Yu jus' keep rememberin' an' wonderin'. No matter whar yu goes ner what yu does, Tolson, thet book'll allus hang over yu. Th' night ain't gittin' no younger." Skipp thrust his blunt chin toward the door.

Chapter Eleven

Johnny Money Fills His Hand



WHEELING, Clay Tolson started for the door with long, floor-shaking strides. As he closed the distance, Johnny came out of his bewilderment and dropped his rifle to the floor, crouching over it with his left hand hovering above the breech.

"You got nothin' to lose now, *Tulare!*" he almost shouted, measuring the distance in a split second as Tolson stopped short at the mocking words and the taunting nickname.

"But *you* have," gritted Clay Tolson, glaring at the man who had caused his downfall, the collapse of his personal empire. His hand shot down toward his hip.

The Big Valley men looked anxiously at Jim Skippworth but all Skipp could do was lower the Greener's hammers and work his jaws overtime to mask his feelings.

Even as Tolson moved, Johnny took a balancing step on his right boot and drove his left leg forward in a vicious arc as he straightened.

Tolson was clearing leather when Johnny's boot connected with the back of his hand. The heavy gun fired into the floor as it fell from nerveless fingers but Tolson never faltered in his insensate drive toward Johnny Money, his face working with his overpowering desire to feel Johnny Mo-

ney beneath his bare hands, to feel his heels grinding Johnny Money into the floor.

Tolson was almost on top of Johnny, his thick arms hooked out like ice tongs, when Johnny's poulticed arm swung out and away from his body in an eye-catching movement. In the same motion, his left hand swung his heavy hat full into Tolson's face with a drawing sweep. Tolson's momentum swung him blindly in the direction of Johnny's poulticed arm. Johnny ducked around him, like dodging a locoed bronc's frantic hoof, and scooped his rifle off the floor.

"*Mucho cuidado!*" barked Johnny, swinging his bad arm under the barrel for a rest.

Tolson winked his eyes clear and pivoted to find his tormentor. He moved forward, still blinded by his killing rage, and Johnny's thumb hooked the hammer back like a snake's head. Tolson stopped, his heavy face draining free of blood lust just as he saw certain death before him.

"I give you a fair chancet," rasped Johnny, "but oncet is all."

He stepped quickly back from Tolson and read the look in the big man's eyes.

"There's your cutter," said Johnny, pointing his rifle at Tolson's gun on the floor, "an' here's my back."

He turned to face Jim Skippworth and the men of Big Valley as he moved.

Tolson looked at him briefly with expressionless eyes. He looked past him at Jim Skippworth and the faces of the other men, men he had bent to his own ends once, and slowly retrieved his gun. He slid it home and stepped swiftly through the door into the outer darkness.

Johnny looked down the room at Jim Skippworth for a long steady minute.

"I'm obliged, Jim," he said feelingly. "A man gets so wrapped up in his own boar's nest he don't see nothin' else 'til it's 'most too late."

"Yu wuz blind ez a snubbin'-post fer shore," agreed Skipp calmly, and his pale eyes began to twinkle. "But don' start thankin' me fer nothin'. I dun hit fer Jodey. She's got a right fer somethin' better'n a choice 'twixt a rich Modoc an' a broke white."

Johnny caught the changed tone in Skipp's voice and tried to match it. He was still trying to wrangle the words when Tom Boston came through the passage from the store and walked slowly toward him with outstretched hand.

"I hate leavin' you in one hole, Junny," said Tom, grinning broadly, "but only for a little bit. Soon's we get married we both come back to string-fence."

"Gettin' married!" spluttered Johnny.

"Sure, Junny," Tom said earnestly. "My folks send word come home tomorruh. Black Robe waiting."

Johnny's face was a mirror of his thoughts. "I sure do wish you th' best, Tom," he said softly and slowly. "I guess I better say congratulations." He unhooked his arm and extended a sweaty hand.

"She's one lucky girl to get me," said Tom, pumping Johnny's hand like he was raising water. "She get chance to live in California now." He gave the hand a final shake that sent shivers down Johnny's spine.

"Don't hooraw me, Tom," said Johnny gruffly. "Miss Josette's done lived here all her life."

"Sure, Junny," nodded Tom Boston, "but who say me marrying Josey? Nossir! I like her fine, you bet, but she got too many ideas. Me, I marry Klamath girl. Good worker, good cook. Josey tell me what girl has to answer when Black Robe talks."

Johnny couldn't grasp the full import of Tom Boston's talk. He looked at his boots and then at Tom's friendly face and his feelings chased themselves across his own face like summer clouds. He looked almost appealingly at Jim Skippworth, and Skipp exploded in a gusty roar of laughter that bobbed his Adam's apple like a fish cork.

The corners of Johnny's mouth began to twitch and he pushed his hat back on his head.

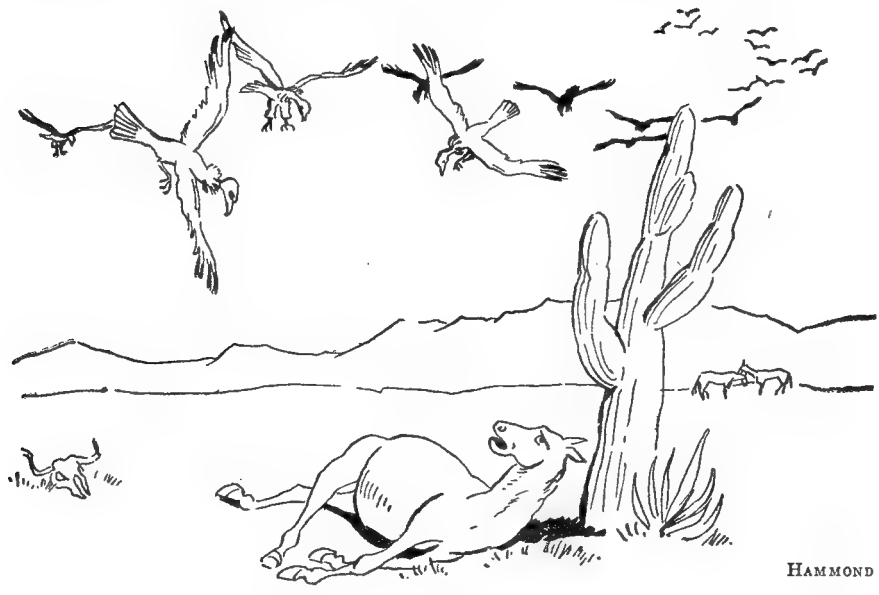
"Laugh, you rancid old goat," he yelled joyously. "'Fore Miss Josette makes up her mind we'll keep you *onsettled*. We'll both see to that."

He turned swiftly and started for the door, stepping out like a lightfoot Baptist heading for a camp meeting.

"Holt on, Johnny," hailed Skipp between bursts of laughter. "I said I wuz buyin', an' I am. Yu an' Tom belly th' bar. Tom gits a seegar, a good thick one."

"Give him one for me," said Johnny over his shoulder. "I never drink 'fore I says good night to a lady. 'Specially when I want to learn Modoc to do it right."

He hurried out the door, leaving Tom Boston and Jim Skippworth grinning broadly at one another. THE END



"Can't a fellow take a nap without getting insulted?"

Free-for-All

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO, author of this month's complete novel, "The Silver Star," is one of America's best-known Western authors. Harry's been busy at this writing trade in one form or another–including stints in a couple of Hollywood studios during the turbulent 'twenties–for over a quarter century. Publishing under his own name and pseudonyms, he's kept a steady flow of books and magazine fiction emerging from his prolific typewriter. ZGWM readers may recall two fine original shorts of his, "Dusty Saddles" and "Long Winter," as well as several meaty reprint yarns. He has written many stories of the Far North but recently has been using Western backgrounds exclusively. Drago stories are distinguished by neat, strong plots and sure characterization. His own opinion, with which we are not inclined to argue, is that "The Silver Star" is probably the best novel he's written.

• J. Frank Dobie, world-famed author of "Wagon-Boss Independence," has been many things–cowman, author, college professor, treasure hunter, and visiting lecturer at Cambridge University, England–and has been called "the most adept and colorful raconteur of Texas and the Southwest." His recent books include *The Voice of the Coyote*, a fascinating volume on animal life and lore, and *The Ben Lilly Legend*, the story of a great American hunter (both published by Little, Brown).

• "A Way With Horses" brings back author "Alec Campbell." When we published his first story some months ago we said we might "tell all" about this pseudonymous writer sometime, but it remains expedient to keep his identity a secret. Properly mystified?

• In "Dangerous Orders," Les Savage, Jr., employs a setting seldom used in Western fiction: Unionist-Confederate conflict. Actual fighting in New Mexico Territory didn't amount to much, although General Sibley's Confederate forces did engage an "army" of mountain men and prospectors in pitched battle near Santa Fe. The Southerners won the field but lost so many supplies that they retreated to Texas, and a Union force from California soon re-

established federal control of the territory.

• S. Omar Barker's "Notch Crazy" is the story of a killer jealous of his gun-reputation whose challenge is met by a kid hardly dry behind the ears—a brief tale, but one high in tense-drama content!

• C. William Harrison's "Range Primer," an engaging growing-pains yarn, is this writer's first ZGWM appearance. A proper introduction is called for, but unfortunately we know only that he's been writing fiction for several years—tell you more about him when next he pops up with a ZGWM yarn.

• "Born To Be Drownded," W. H. Hutchinson's contribution, is labeled "fact-fiction" at the author's request, it being, as he says, a blend of truth and fancy. The Empire Hotel of the story actually stood in Rich Bar on the North Fork of Feather River; Hutch has moved it to Moccasin Flat (imaginary) for story purposes. The data on, and importance of, early-day skiing in the High Sierra are veritable, states Hutch; the plot incidents (the "snowshoe" race, the winner's masquerade, the killing, the trial, and the gambler's belief in his star-told fortune) "cannot be documented but I believe them to be, if not true in every detail, most definitely true to the character of the men who filled the creeks of the northern Sierra after 1850."

From the mailbag: Dee Hammond, of Lewiston, Maine, sends in an interesting list of "ZGWM bests." Authors: Dan Muller ("The Cactus Kid and the Artist's Life"); Harry S. Drago ("Ghost of the Cimarron"); S. Omar Barker ("Corazon Means Heart"); Walker A. Tompkins (Paintin' Pistoleer yarns). Artists: Jacobson, Abbett, Murray, Firfires, Muller. Pictorial features: Randy Steffen. Calls for more: B. M. Bower, O. Henry, Jo Mora. Quite a list, and really appreciated! Why not tell us what *you* like best in ZGWM? Three bucks paid for usable letters.

—THE EDITORS.

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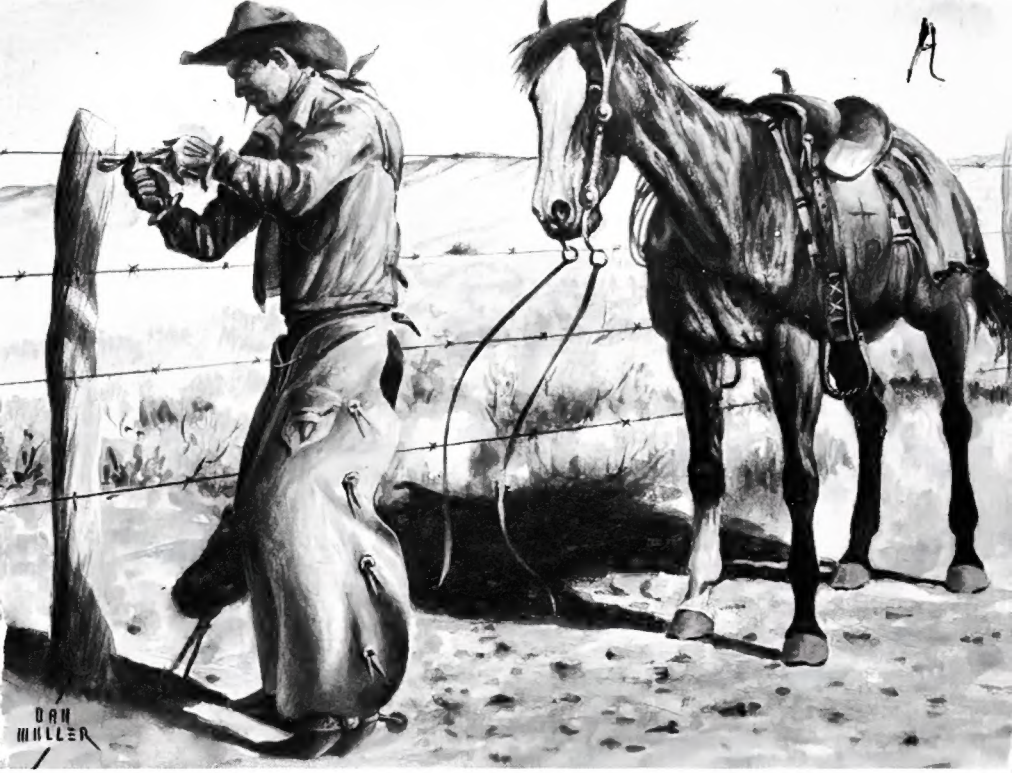

JACK OF ALL TRADES

AMIGOS, here is a cowhand doing a chore that every good range rider does—and he does it without being told. Most cowpokes carry a pair of pliers with them at all times. While riding fence or on other chores he may run acrost a loose strand of wire and he will immediately take up the slack; sometimes a small stick, used all same like a tourniquet, will do. The better the condition of the fence, the fewer the strays among the stock. Cows have a habit of rubbing against the barbwire—maybe it's ticks, maybe jest an itch. Their weight makes the strands sag where they rub against it, sometimes maybe creating an opening big enough for them to get their head and a leg through —the rest follows easy enough.

Along other lines, the cowhand may find he has to climb to the top of the windmill when it goes haywire. He has to repair the round-up wagons, mend harness, shoe hosses—or even act as dress model when the ranch foreman's wife wants to pin up a new creation she's throwed together. It's all in the day's—and night's—work . . . no life for a finicky gent!

DAN MULLER

In This Issue:

THE SILVER STAR, *by Harry Sinclair Drago*

A hard-hitting, action-filled novel about a man who becomes a town tamer to avenge the death of his brother. Bob Maxwell is just a competent, peaceful ranch foreman until the murder of his brother Tom leads him to take the trail of a wanton killer. That trail brings him to the tough town of Wild Horse, where he finds not only badmen "Hog" Smith and Doc Morrell but also the lovely, gentle-spirited Pia Sandoval. Then Bob and his brother Luis, sided by the case-hardened riders of the 7-11 outfit, run into gunsmoke aplenty before Wild Horse is tamed for good and a baffling mystery is solved.

DANGEROUS ORDERS, *by Les Savage, Jr.*

When the Confederate tide threatens to engulf the Southwest, Lieutenant John Hunter has to ride into the desert on a perilous mission—accompanied by the enemy!

NOTCH CRAZY, *by S. Omar Barker*

Something's bound to happen when a trigger-happy badman thinks his rep is at stake—even when the other party is an untested cowpoke, too young to die and too green to scare easy.

WAGON-BOSS INDEPENDENCE, *by J. Frank Dobie*

The Southwest's foremost storyteller and folklorist recalls some old trail-drive tales.

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